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THE HEART OF OAK DETECTIVE



OR, ZIGZAG'S FULL HAND.

A Romance of Texan Toughs and
Texan Trails.

BY E. A. ST. MOX,

AUTHOR OF "OLD INVISIBLE," "LEAGUE OF THE
THREE," "ROOM NO. 69," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

"UP WITH YOUR HANDS!"

SUDDENLY the whistle of the locomotive emitted a series of ear-splitting screeches, and the instant application of the air-brakes and the rasping of the wheels on the rails told the startled passengers that some fearful danger threatened them.

Alarmed exclamations followed, and the people hastily threw up windows and thrust out their heads, while others ran to the platforms of the cars, and, clinging to the guards, leaned far over to one side and peered anxiously ahead to learn the cause of the alarm.

But not one of the exclamations was true:

SEVERAL OF THE ROBBER GANG WHO SAW HIM, LAUGHED UPROARIOUSLY AT THE FIGURE
OLD PELEG CUT AS HE RAN DOWN THE TRACK.

in one sense the peril which threatened was more terrifying than any of the causes imagined.

Meanwhile the train was rapidly coming to a halt. The brakes gripped the wheels with a fierceness that held them rigid, and the cars were checked so suddenly that they had a shivering motion which it seemed would derail them.

The engine was sweeping round a curve, when the sharp warnings were sent out by the whistle, so that those who had their heads out of the windows and who were leaning so far over from the platforms could see the side of the engine and the engineer, who, having drawn back the reversing lever, had started the sand from the box over the boiler; but the steam in the cylinders sent the ponderous driving wheels revolving backward with such speed that their spinning tires threw out sparks of fire plainly seen by all, even though the sun was shining.

What was it that had caught the engineer's eye, but was not visible to the others?

The train was passing at rather a high rate of speed through a long stretch of stunted pine, which is so common in many parts of Northern Texas, and those who were acquainted with the road knew they were near no deep cut or large stream of water.

Crack! crack! crack! sounded a number of Winchesters from among the trees on both sides of the cars, while the glimpse of a dozen sombreros from behind as many tree-trunks which only partly concealed the bodies of the cowboys told the fearful truth: the railway train was about to be "held up."

More than that, the train-robbers were firing into the cars from which so many heads were thrust!

The frantic haste to withdraw from sight and the wild scramble of those on the platforms to get back out of range of the whistling bullets were laughable despite the element of tragedy they contained.

Peleg Thurman, an honest old farmer with spectacles, the picture of Joshua Whitecomb, let the window-sash fall on the back of his neck and could neither push his head out any further or draw it in.

"Consarn it!" he yelled; "won't somebody lift that log off? My neck is broke in four places!"

But no one paid any attention to the appeal, and Peleg was in the situation of the colored youth at Coney Island, who sticks his head through a rent in the tent and allows any one who will pay for the privilege to hurl all the balls he wishes at his pate.

After several frantic efforts he got the frame raised high enough for him to jerk back his head like a scared turtle, and to scrape off considerable skin from his chin while doing so.

An elderly lady was so panic-stricken that she kept her face out of the window, and screamed loud enough almost to drown the blasts of the steam whistle and the reports of the rifles.

When the doors at the end of the cars were driven inward by the wild rush of those on the platforms, they stumbled over each other, smashing hats, breaking canes, ruining clothing and raising the mischief generally.

"Ginger and blazes!" exclaimed Peleg Thurman, as the spectacles were whisked from his nose by a shot that came through the window, and sent his glasses flying into fragments; "that was the cluskest shave of my life! Hang the critters! if they ain't more keerful they'll hit somebody bimeby."

It was evident to the few cool-headed ones on the train that the cowboys were not shooting to kill. Had they wished to do so, they would have picked off a person with every shot, for they handled the rifle like Captain Carver himself.

But feeling that the game was in their hands, they wanted to have a little fun, and they were having it with a vengeance.

"We're going to be rotbed!" called out a dudish young man near the front of the middle car; "do the best you can to hide your money and valuables!"

When people are overtaken by a panic, they do ridiculous things. The efforts of some of the passengers to conceal their property where the train-robbers could not find it, were as amusing as were the desperate attempts of Peleg Thurman to get his head back through the window.

Under the cushions, into shoes and boots, under the strip of carpet which ran down the middle of the aisle, where the robbers were sure to step upon the articles, in the lamps overhead, into unused pockets and every conceivable place, the watches, jewelry and purses were jammed, just as the robbers would expect to be done, and where they were certain to find each and every one.

Suddenly the round, moon-like face of Peleg Thurman was pushed over the shoulder of a *petite* young lady who sat in front of him, and catching her arm, he asked:

" Didn't you tell me awhile ago that you were from Chicago?"

" Yes," she answered, showing less agitation than most of the others, though she was striving hard to find a hiding-place for some costly jewelry.

" I'm mighty glad to hear it! I've got a bull's-eye watch here that belonged to my father that fit into the battle of Bunker Hill, and here's a puss that my darter Polly knit for me and which has a lot of silver into it; I'll be obleeged to you if you will put 'em into one of your shoes, where the robbers would be too perlite to look for 'em, and they wouldn't bother—"

It must be borne in mind that all we have been telling, and indeed much more took place in an exceedingly short space of time.

Peleg Thurman cut short his appeal to the lady from Chicago, because just then he became aware that the train under the iron-like grip of the brakes, had come to a standstill.

Indeed, when the cowboys opened fire the cars were hardly moving, so those who had indulged in the fusilade had to walk only a few steps to place themselves beside the coaches that held their victims.

That which had caught the eye of the engineer and caused him to apply the brakes with such suddenness, was a rock in the middle of the track, while behind it stood a couple of men in the dress of cowboys, one of whom was waving a red handkerchief.

The engine-driver well knew that only by the most tremendous pressure of the brakes could the train be brought to a stop soon enough to prevent the engine from smashing its front against the mass of stone. Accordingly he applied the air-brakes and whistled his warning to those in front, well aware that he was confronted by train-robbers, and more than likely his cab, his firemen and himself would be riddled by the bullets of the outlaws.

But Doc Hankins belonged to the Brotherhood, and, though he knew that the hearts of his wife and little chub of a boy down at Austin, would be broken, if they should never see him again, he had no more thought of taking his hand from the throttle or deserting his train than he had of shooting the President of the United States.

Slower and still slower moved the huge engine, with the yellow sand grinding beneath the wheels, until at last the prong-like snout of the iron monster stopped within six inches of the huge rock between the rails!

" Up with your hands!" called the leader of the robbers; "keep quiet and don't show yourselves and nobody will be hurt, but, if you don't do as you're told, we'll blow daylight through every one!"

CHAPTER II.

A HEROIC GIRL.

THERE were fifteen of the train-robbers, a rather large band and more than was necessary, since a third of that number, as has been often proven, are quite sufficient to clean out an entire trainful of passengers.

Hardly had the squeaking wheels ceased to turn, when the cowboys sprung upon the platforms and entered the cars. At each door one of the men was stationed with a cocked Winchester, while two others began their tour through the length of the aisle for the purpose of levying tribute from the passengers.

" Get all your money, watches and jewelry ready," shouted one of the robbers, " and hand 'em over without any haggling; if you'll do that, no one will get hurt; if you try to hide any of 'em or we catch you in a lie, it'll be the last you'll ever tell!"

This direful threat caused many to withdraw their property from the various hiding-

places and to give it up, with great promptness, to the collectors.

" I'll be gosh-darned if I'm going to stay here and be robbed of my watch and eighteen dollars and a half!" exclaimed Peleg Thurman, catching up his huge carpet-sack and making a break for the rear door.

The road-raider stationed there smiled at the terror and indignation of the old fellow, and, instead of stopping him, allowed him to take a leap from the platform. Several of the robber-gang who saw him, laughed uproariously at the figure old Peleg cut as he ran down the track, carpet-sack in hand and his long linen duster fluttering almost straight out behind him. Sooner, however, than any of that gang suspected it came the turn of the old gentleman to laugh.

" Are we going to submit to this outrage? Are there not men enough here to teach these wretches a lesson?"

These words were uttered by a young lady passenger, on her way from St. Louis to San Antonio, and traveling without an escort. She was one of the fairest and most accomplished daughters of the South, and like many of those bewitching creatures was an adept in the use of fire-arms.

She was sitting deeply interested in reading, when she was roused by the alarm of those around her, quickly followed by the shots of the outlaws. But only when the latter had actually entered the car did she realize that the passengers had no thought of resistance. There were three cars, and in each were from a dozen to twenty gentlemen, most of whom it was safe to say were armed.

When she saw how meekly all of those around her were preparing to be robbed, her bosom heaved with indignation like that which nauseated the whole country, some time ago, when it was learned that a party of United States soldiers had passed over their arms to a smaller number of ruffians without firing a shot in the way of resistance.

Every one of the robbers was masked, having a piece of black cloth covering all of his face, except his eyes and mouth. In a few cases the chin was exposed, but a close acquaintance of those thus disguised would have found it hard to recognize them.

At the moment the young lady uttered her indignant protest, she rose to her feet and looked around upon the men in the car, her eyes flashing and her whole frame quivering with anger.

One or two seemed to be ashamed of their cowardice and hesitated, as if half-determined to offer resistance, but the sight of an armed man at each door, with his cocked Winchester, and of the two others passing along the aisle, loaded revolvers in hand, their courage oozed from their fingers' ends, and they were the most prompt in handing over their valuables.

One of the robbers at that instant came opposite to the courageous young lady. He was heard to chuckle behind his mask, as he said, with an oath:

" It's worth all this trouble to look upon as purty a face as yours."

" You villain! Don't you dare to touch me!"

" That's a mighty fine watch, I judge, from the chain, and I've no doubt them shinners in your ears is genooine diamonds; sorry to trouble you, miss, but you'd better hand 'em over."

" Never!" she answered, closing her thin lips and confronting him with a bravery that thrilled every one.

" Then I'll have to take 'em away from you, and I must say it'll be rare fun to do it!"

" Try it, if you dare!"

" Ho! ho! if these men hed half the gall you've got, ther'd be some blood spilt."

" There will be blood spilt if you dare to lay the weight of a finger on me."

" We'll see about that, my purty one—"

There was a flash in the masked face, a deafening report from the tiny revolver, whose muzzle almost touched the nose of the scoundrel.

With a howl of pain and fury, the bandit reeled backward and would have fallen to the floor, had not his pal directly behind caught him in his arms.

Inspired by what she had done, the brave maiden let fly with the remaining chambers

of her revolver at the second man, who dropped his companion and rushed for the door.

"What's the matter?" demanded the guard at the front of the car, raising his Winchester, as if seeking for the passenger that had dared to offer resistance; "who fired that shot?"

"I did," answered the miss, still on her feet, with the smoking weapon in her gloved hand; "if my pistol was not empty I would give you the rest of the charges!"

The villain raised his gun with a muttered curse.

"It don't make no difference if you are a gal—we've the same medicine for all," and the wretch deliberately sighted his weapon at the lady, who looked back with flashing eyes and defiant demeanor.

"Come, Pete, that won't do," called out the robber at whom the remaining shots had been fired, but who escaped unhurt; "the lady is real grit; no one but a dog would harm her."

There is a spark of manhood in the vilest nature; the tough, who had brought his rifle to a level with the purpose of driving the bullet through the young woman, seemed to feel ashamed of his purpose and lowered the weapon again.

"All right, pard; I don't know as it would be the squar' thing to give her her last illness in that style, and being as she hain't got any more charges in her bean-shooter, we'll let her be. Be quick, gentlemen; we haven't any time to spare."

The man who had tumbled backward on receiving the shot of the young lady was seen to be struggling to his feet, cursing and moaning with pain.

He was hit hard but not mortally hurt. The fair hand which held and fired the small pistol was so tremulous from excitement, that, despite the closeness of the target, the ball ranged through the cheek and out at the back of the neck, instead of passing through the skull as the one who fired it intended it should do.

Holding one hand to his bleeding face, he turned and glared at the young lady as if about to leap upon her like a tiger, but he refrained, and walking unsteadily to the door, sprung to the ground, muttering:

"I've enough of that wild-cat; you can manage the rest of the business yourself," he growled, as he staggered off among the trees to nurse his wound.

The raider from the other end of the car now walked slowly and with a certain air of respect toward the miss who had resumed her seat, and despite the screen over his face, it was evident that he was greatly agitated.

Any one looking at him would have noticed his manly figure, and would have said that he was not more than twenty-three or four years of age. The hair which clattered about his neck was a dark auburn, and was silky and curly, while his hands were almost as white and fair as those of a woman.

The boots into which his trowsers' legs were shoved, were small and shapely, and there was a grace of movement that even in that thrilling moment was noticed by more than one spectator whose eyes were riveted on the strange scene.

"Miss," said he, touching his forefinger to the front of his sombrero, as if unconsciously, and leaning over to prevent any one else hearing his low tones, "your act was brave, but it was unwise to the last degree."

The lady instead of replying, started, and looked up in the masked face with a frightened look.

There was something in the tones—soft and low—which excited her strangely. She saw that the young man was agitated and trembling.

With a morbid fear that his disguise might not be complete, he placed his hand against the black muslin and endeavored to press it closer to his face.

In his excitement, he defeated his purpose and so disarranged it, that she who had already noticed his deep blue eyes, saw the silky mustache and the finely cut mouth.

"Great Heavens!" she gasped, "it is you, Fred!"

"For the love of heaven do not speak, Evelyn! I would have preferred death than that you should have known me!"

And turning about, he fled from the car, apparently with as much terror as did the wounded robber but a few minutes before.

CHAPTER III.

A MAN OF NERVE.

MEANWHILE, there was the liveliest kind of times at the front of the train.

Jack Burton, the Express messenger, had a cool fifty thousand dollars in his safe, and he always went heeled for the gentlemen of the road. He had no companion, for he had twice beaten off a fierce attack of train robbers and he was confident he could do it again. On one of the occasions, a bullet passed through Jack's arm and buried itself in the woodwork behind him. After the affray was over, he gouged out the lead with his penknife, and had it made into a charm which he wore upon his watch chain.

"I thought they were about due," he coolly muttered, when he peered out of the side of the Express car at the moment the brakes were applied with such rigidity that he was thrown almost off his feet; "well, the band will soon begin to play!"

He always kept the doors at the sides of the car securely locked. There were none at the front and rear, and in a twinkling, he was ready for his visitors.

"Open those doors! Be quick about it, too, or we'll fill your carcass as full of holes as a sieve."

Jack did not waste his breath in bandying words. He had two revolvers and two Winchesters. All of course were loaded, and he stationed himself near the front of the car, close to the safe, and with the same amazing coolness he had shown from the first, awaited the development of events.

Suddenly there was a tremendous bang against one of the side doors, followed by another and another, the momentum being such that it was clear that all resistance must soon be overcome.

"They've hit upon a new dodge," said Jack to himself; "and I shouldn't wonder if they win this time. However, I'll make it cost them dear."

No doubt some of the gang had been in similar business, before for their assault upon the Express car must have been founded upon lessons previously learned.

A tree-trunk, half a foot in diameter, had been partly denuded of its limbs, so that a number of short prongs or stumps of limbs projected from it throughout most of its length. Lifting this from the ground by these handles, six of the cowboys (having been reinforced from those in the train) ran rapidly forward, supporting the log between them and driving the butt like a battering-ram, with great force against the door.

"She's yielding!" called out one jubilantly, as he saw it sink inward a few inches; "we'll fetch her next time."

Sure enough, so they did. Unprepared for such violence, the door suddenly crashed inward, carried off its support, and a large opening appeared in the side of the car.

"Hurrah! we've got him now—"

From the semi-darkness of the car spouted a jet of flame, and the exultant cowboy flung up his arms with a shriek and went over backward.

The others were stupefied for a minute, but, before they could rally or fall back a second shot was heard and the robber nearest the now lifeless form fell across it, and the subsequent proceedings interested him no more.

"Score two for Jack Burton," muttered that hero, keeping as far back as he could in the car; "I shouldn't wonder if they fetch me this time, but I ain't dead yet."

The fearful reception given the train-robbers taught them discretion. Those who were about to clamber into the car, hurried back beyond reach of the resolute messenger within.

The battle at this spot quickly drew the attention of the rest, and leaving only a single cowboy to guard each car, they hastened to the help of those who were bent on capturing the treasure in the safe.

That was their real purpose in holding up the train. They had had their agents on the watch for weeks, and they knew the very hour when the fifty thousand dollars would leave St. Louis for its destination in San Antonio.

They were confident that it could be easily

captured by a bold stroke, and their action in going through the passenger-cars was merely a side issue.

A consultation was now held. Some were in favor of building a fire under the car, and burning out the brave defender of the treasure, while others advocated an attack with the battering-ram on the other side; but both plans were discarded—the latter, because it would involve the certain death of one or two of the participants, and the former, because it would consume too much time.

No trains were due for several hours, but the robbers knew that before morning the fact of the robbery would be telegraphed up and down the line, and the officers of the law would be after them; they wanted all the start, therefore, that could be obtained.

"He is nearly covered," said one of the outlaws, who had been making a careful reconnaissance; "if we open a fire into the cars from every quarter, I think we'll bring him down."

This proposition was followed, and for the next ten minutes the rifle-firing sounded like that of a skirmish line in battle. The outlaws took every possible position, and emptied their Winchesters through the opening as fast as they could load and fire.

It struck a number of them as strange that no return shot came from the Express messenger. Now and then, when there was a lull in the fusilade, the ears of the assailants were strained to catch the reply, but they heard nothing. Finally one of the more venturesome stole a little closer and peered as far as he could into the interior.

He caught a glimpse of the huge black safe, with its gilt lettering and massive knobs and doors, but the man paid to guard it was nowhere visible.

"He's been winged," said Ham Maxley, a one-armed member of the gang and one of the greatest desperadoes north of the Rio Grande.

"Don't be too sure of that," replied Arkansas Amos, the real leader of the robber gang; "I know Jack Burton, and if ever a man had sand he's got it."

"That may be," retorted Ham, "but what good does sand do any one when he's got no show?"

"Jack's a hustler from Husterville, and don't you fail to retain it in your memory at all times."

"Bah! ain't we the galoots that laid out and settled Husterville, and then pulled stakes because it was too slow, and staked out another camp? What'll you make it, Arkansas, if I'll lasso that youth?"

"One thousand extra."

"Done! give me room."

"Back, boys," called the leader; "room for Ham!"

"I don't want much room," said the daredevil, with a grin, as he moved along the side of the train toward the battered car door; "if I go under we'll meet in the saccharine hereafter," which was Ham's style of referring to the "sweet by-and-by."

When within ten or twelve steps of the opening, he was almost certain that the messenger had been killed by some one of the bullets. But the desperado was running a fearful risk, and he knew it.

Finally he placed his hand on the sides of the car close to the opening and called out:

"Up with your hands, Jack, and we'll treat you squar': we're white, all wool a yard wide!"

At that instant, Jack Burton, who had been struck twice limped forward into view, and, without saying a word, leveled his revolver at the frowsy head glaring upward and into the car like a wild beast, and fired two shots. With a rasping howl, Ham Maxley toppled over backward as dead as the two comrades that had preceded him. Raising his pistol, Jack Burton then let fly with the remaining charges right into the faces of the road-agents, who were yelling for his life.

It was a reckless deed, and, when he turned to withdraw behind cover, he staggered in such a way that every one knew that he was hit hard.

"He's done for!" was the shout that went up, as the gang rushed forward.

The next instant they were scrambling through the opening into the car, eager and athirst for the treasure in the safe.

Jack Burton lay motionless on his back, one leg drawn up so that the knee was raised, the other straight, his arms extended, his two rifles leaning in the corner, his empty revolvers lying on the floor, where they had fallen from his nerveless grasp.

His glazed eyes seemed to be staring at the roof of the car, in which for the third time he had made such a brave defense of the property belonging to others. But it was the last time, for he was stone dead.

On a slip of paper lying near, he had laboriously traced a few words. They were:

"DEAREST MOTHER—I've got it this time, but I made it come high—I leave my all—which ain't much—to you and sister Nellie—my last thoughts are of you—the best and dearest mother that ever lived—forgive me if I have ever— Good-by. JACK."

CHAPTER IV.

A STRANGE RECOGNITION.

HEEDLESS of the dead hero stretched on the floor of the Express car, the scoundrels, panting to reach the gold in the safe, closed around the massive structure, shoved it on its wheels to the side door and gave it a push which caused it to fall to the ground outside.

The only man who could give them the combination was dead; it was necessary, therefore, to batter in the ponderous door. As may be supposed, the train-robbers were prepared for this contingency.

So suddenly, that it would have been hard to tell where they came from, two stalwart toughs caught up a couple of sledge-hammers and began beating the rock-like structure. The safe, however, was of the best modern make, and it was a vast task to smash in that eight-inch thickness of chilled steel. In fact, it would take all the men that could gather around it a day or two to reach the fifty thousand dollars within.

Two powerful fellows swung the huge hammers aloft until they were exhausted, after which they stopped to take breath. As yet there was not the slightest sign that they had started any of the fastenings, or made so much as a dent in the adamantine walls. It was like the rat gnawing the file; that which attacked the safe was weaker than the safe itself.

Meanwhile every minute was becoming valuable beyond price. There was a railway station a half-mile beyond. True, the agent who acted for the road was also the telegraphist, and stood in with the train-robbers, but his task was a delicate one, and he could not keep back the truth very long.

Nearly two hours had passed since the train had been halted, and the autumn sun was low in the west. When the orb should appear again, these road raiders must be many long miles away. If not, they might be compelled to make the acquaintance of several sheriffs and their deputies, or a stronger company of Vigilantes were likely to get in their work ahead of the officers of the law, for it need not be said that when Judge Lynch went into that business he "got there" every time.

While the hammering was going on, nearly all the rest of the cowboys were grouped around, watching the toilers, and ready to take their turn. The bodies of those who had fallen were dragged back among the trees, where they were out of sight of the passengers. Their comrades were so accustomed to such scenes of violence that scarce a sigh of regret escaped any one of them.

The passengers having recovered from their fright, ventured to look from the windows again. Some even went out upon the platforms, but they did so rather gingerly, and held themselves ready to plunge back the moment any of the gang looked threateningly toward them.

One of the men, after watching the safe-hammering for a short time, sauntered down to the train, and finally boarded it, as if his intention was to see that no one ventured to leave.

This man was the handsome youth, who was recognized by the young heroine that made such a brave defense against the outlaws. Halting at the open door of the car, where the passengers who were standing parted to make room for him, he glanced unceasingly down the aisle.

Yes, there she sat—Evelyn Clarendon, the only woman that he had ever loved, the queen of his heart, the gem of her sex.

He never expected to look upon that

enchanting countenance, nor gaze into the liquid depth of those marvelous eyes under such circumstances; but fate ordered that he should do so.

As he gazed at her, he noticed that she was looking fixedly at him. Both recognized each other, but not another soul in the car suspected it.

She had addressed him as "Fred," when they exchanged their few hurried words. That was his given name, but among his associates he was known as Handsome Harry.

Only for an instant did he look at her. Then he began walking slowly down the aisle, as though he had no special object in view, while Evelyn Clarendon watched calmly the masked face as it approached.

The dark stretch of muslin could not entirely shut out those winning features upon which she had looked so many times. The patch hid from others, but not from her, the fine Roman nose, the drooping silken mustache, the small mouth, the white, even teeth, the well-rounded chin and the perfect contour of face.

Her heart prompted her to address him, but Evelyn Clarendon had, in a marked degree, that intuition of her sex which enabled her to see clearly where others were blind.

To let it be known that she recognized this particular man of Arkansaw's gang was likely to involve him in serious trouble, and, much as she abominated his surroundings, she would not have said or done a thing to injure him had they been a thousandfold worse.

She was seated alone, and there was no sleeping-car just then with the train, but it was arranged that one would be taken on at a point lower down the road.

As the outlaw drew near, therefore, the young lady kept her dark eyes fixed upon the half-concealed face. She had speaking eyes of wonderful power, and no words could have said plainer than did they:

"Fred, I love you as I have never loved and never can love a human being."

He walked more slowly as he came nearer, hesitated and then seemed to make up his mind to pass on. At that instant, a faint smile illuminated her face; she pressed her glove against the side of her dress! no plainer invitation could be given for him to seat himself beside her, and he accepted it without further hesitation.

Most of those in the car noticed the curious proceeding and set Miss Clarendon down as a forward miss, with little self-respect, who had taken a fancy to the outlaw simply because he was an outlaw, but little did any one dream that they were old friends!

The young man glanced about, and seeing the attention his movement had attracted, said in a voice so low that no ears except those for which the words were intended could hear them:

"Evelyn, how did you know me?"

"How could I help knowing you?"

"I have a note written to you; will you accept it?"

"I will."

He passed it to her so deftly that no one else saw it.

"I cannot talk to you now; good-by for a little while. The note will explain what I mean."

"Very well."

The young man now passed out the car and joined those who were growing desperate over the stubbornness of the safe.

By royal permission of Arkansaw Amos, the leader of the robbers, the engineer and fireman, with the help of as many of the passengers as could get around the rock, rolled it off the track.

The engineer now gave a long resounding blast from the whistle to call in any of the passengers who might be wandering away. The signal call was repeated and finally the train began slowly moving southward again.

CHAPTER V.

UNCLE PELEG FROM NEW HAMPSHIRE.

WHEN Peleg Thurman leaped off the rear platform of the last car, and with his long linen duster flying, and his big carpet-bag in hand started down the track, he did not run far.

Dodging to one side he plunged among the trees, changing squarely about until he was following a direction precisely the same

as that which the train was following when brought to such a sudden stop.

He had simply gone so far into the woods that there was no danger of his being observed by any of the outlaws, and to make sure on this point, he increased the distance between him and the railway. Even at this distance the shouts and sounds of firing reached his ears with startling distinctness.

"It would have looked an infernal sight better if I had stayed and rallied the passengers to make a fight of it, just as I did down in the Indian Nation last summer, but, that would have upset some of our plans."

Peleg stood still a minute, and then, satisfied with what he heard, he resumed his walk toward the south, soon trending toward the rails again. Two or three hundred yards further on, he reached them, and standing with his foot on one of the stretchers of iron, he looked anxiously up the road.

The line at that point curved enough to shut out entirely the train and the men engaged in robbing it.

"They can't see me," he said with some exultation, "and now, Mr. Peleg Thurman, you must imagine that you are at Madison Square Garden, on the home stretch, two laps ahead of the best record."

Had the situation been as suggested, Peleg Thurman most certainly would have won the world's championship as a pedestrian. The strides which he took down the railway were so long and rapid, that an ordinary man would have been forced to a trot to keep pace with him. Catching sight at last of the station, he dodged aside among the trees again. Ten minutes later, a gentleman looking for all the world like a well-to-do dominie, stepped forth.

He was neatly dressed in a suit of black, had no carpet-bag, and instead of the round, innocent face of Joshua Whitcomb, it was the sleek, smooth countenance of a city parson on a little tramp for the benefit of his health. He bore no more resemblance to Peleg Thurman than did Arkansaw Amos, the leader of the cowboys who had robbed the train, but it was Peleg all the same.

A few more minutes of his tremendous pace and he reached the station, which consisted of a single small house where the operator and agent lived entirely alone.

He was a young and rather fresh-looking man, who sat at the clicking instrument with the air of one deeply interested in the message that was passing over the wire.

Taking up one of the yellow blanks, the visitor wrote the following message:

"JARED BIXBY, AUSTIN:—

"Am enjoying the vacation my church kindly gave me. Train broke down one mile north of this point at half-past four this afternoon. Repairs delayed without delay. J. J. BANCROFT."

"Can I send this message at once?" blandly inquired the ministerial gentleman, beaming through the gold-rimmed spectacles which he had fished out from his capacious carpet-bag.

The operator looked up with an impudent stare, but made no reply, and in keeping with his assumed character, Mr. Bancroft waited till it pleased the operator to rise and approach the narrow window. He then began tipping the words of the message with the point of a lead pencil.

"Fifty-six cents," he said.

"Will you please send it at once?" asked the caller, placing a silver half-dollar and six pennies on the lid of the window.

"I'll see—don't strike me that there's such mighty need of hurry."

"I am not aware, young man, that it is necessary that it should strike you any way at all, in order to induce you to do your duty."

The operator looked up in surprise. He was not used to such impudence; but before he could frame the retort direct, the ministerial-looking personage placed another half-dollar on the ledge, saying in the most fatherly manner:

"I have no doubt that you are greatly overworked, and I beg to give you this by way of a slight reminder, that I appreciate your trying task."

The agent was won over at once. He actually blushed as he smiled, and said in his most pleasant manner:

"Thanks, awfully; the message shall be sent immediately. And so you were on the train; what caused it to break down?"

"A band of robbers; they are now engaged in plundering the passengers, and I fear have attacked the Express car."

"Is it possible?" asked the young man in well-feigned astonishment; "tell me all about it."

"There isn't much to tell; I said to my friends that the train had broken down, but I didn't want to frighten them; I managed to slip away when they were not looking, and walked on to this station."

In answer to the eager inquiries of the agent, his visitor told a story in which there was about as much fiction as truth. He was hardly through when the operator sat down at his instrument, saying:

"Your dispatch shall go right off."

"Thanks; you are very attentive to duty."

Leaning on the ledge of the window, Reverend Mr. Bancroft listened carefully to the ticking of the instrument, and this is what he read, as plainly as did the operator who received it in Dallas:

"JAMES CRAWLEY, Dallas, Texas:—

"Had a sharp fall of rain one mile north at half-past four this afternoon; not yet over. Tom."

"Have you sent it?" blandly asked the parson, looking sweetly upon the wicked youngster who replied:

"Yes; she's just gone all right; do you expect an answer?"

"No; I'm obliged; I think I'll walk up the road again; I can reach the cars before they start."

"That's doubtful."

"But I'll try it; good-day."

"Good-day." And Reverend Mr. Bancroft moved off in the direction of the train that was being held up, and reaching the point where Peleg Thurman had entered the wood with his carpet-bag, he vanished among the trees.

This time he remained out of sight a long time, and when he came forth, he was Peleg Thurman himself, with his long linen duster, his huge carpet-bag and his verdant appearance!

A rumbling sound caught his ear, and, looking up, he saw the train coming round the curve toward him.

He stepped aside and kept out of sight until it had passed; then he turned and retraced his steps toward the station, but before he could reach it, the train resumed its journey and soon puffed its way out of sight.

Standing on the platform was a person who was not the agent.

Drawing near, Peleg Thurman—who, in reality, was none other than the celebrated Zigzag, known through all the West as the Heart of Oak Detective—suddenly recognized the party. As he did so, he stopped short with the muttered exclamation:

"Great heaven! is it possible?"

He was never so astounded in all his life.

CHAPTER VI.

AT THE WAY STATION.

WELL might Peleg Thurman, the honest-looking farmer, utter the exclamation.

"Great Heaven! is it possible?" for as he approached that lonely Texan railway station, with not another dwelling in sight, and the shades of a cool autumn night closing in, he saw standing upon the platform, and looking attentively at him—not a man but a young, exceedingly well-dressed and handsome young lady.

It was Evelyn Clarendon, who had made such a brave resistance to the train-robbers, though, of course, he knew nothing about that.

She had thrown up her vail, so that her splendid face was in plain sight, as she caught the wondering expression upon the countenance of Peleg.

"What in the name of the seven wonders brings you here?" he asked, stepping slowly upon the platform beside her.

During the long ride from St. Louis, the two had exchanged bits of conversation, and became well acquainted. The great detective was a wonderfully skillful reader of faces and he saw that Miss Clarendon was a lady of exceptionally brilliant parts.

She was sure that Uncle Peleg, as she learned to call him, was a good honest old fellow, whom it was safe to trust as her own father, and she was right in that respect; so she listened to his account of his farm in New Hampshire, of his good wife Peggy

and his two smart sons Josiah and Peleg, the latter named for himself. In return she told him a great deal about herself, saying that she was on her way to visit an old schoolmate in San Antonio, the quaint town in Southern Texas.

It will be understood, therefore, that when the two met at this out-of-the-way place in the Lone Star State, they did so as old acquaintances.

Danger makes friends of such acquaintances, and the situation, as well as the mutual regard between the two, brought them together. Extending his hand, Peleg said:

"Wal, I'll be consarned, if I ain't scared out of a year's growth."

"What has scared you, Uncle Peleg?"

"You."

"What have I done?"

"What brought you here?"

"The train of cars."

"But why did you get off?"

"I have business in this neighborhood."

"Business? Why, thar ain't no house in sight; what possessed the railway folks to set up a station here gits my time; what business have you in this country?"

The young lady looked calmly in his face and smiled.

"What brought you here?"

"My legs," was the rather blunt reply.

"But, why didn't you go with the train?"

"I got left."

"What made you get left?"

"Wal, I 'spose it was 'cause the train got left in the first place by me."

"Matters got too warm for you and you jumped off the platform and took to the woods."

"I swan if it didn't sorter look that way."

"If you had been here when the train stopped, would you have gone off with it?"

Uncle Peleg looked sharply at his fair questioner, conscious that she was putting him through a mighty sharp cross-examination.

"If anybody else had axed me that, I would have said yes, but being it's you, I'll tell the truth and say no."

"Uncle Peleg," said the lady, with that resistless smile and knowing look, "I think you are an honest man."

"Wal, I've bore that name up in New Hampshire where I've lived all the time that I have lived."

"I am going to tell you a secret, for I want your advice and I am sure you will keep sacred what I tell you."

"You can depend on that, sart'in sure."

"Let's go inside and sit down where we can talk quietly."

"No," demurred Uncle Peleg, emphatically; "the young man there can't be trusted."

Miss Clarendon looked sharply at him. She noticed that his accent was not at all like that she had been accustomed to hear from his lips.

"How is it that you know anything about him?"

"Never mind, Miss Clarendon; suffice it that I do know. Tell me what you wish to tell me and I will do all in my power to help you."

"I will."

From the bosom of her dress, Miss Clarendon drew forth a crumpled note which she handed to Uncle Peleg, with the remark:

"Read that carefully."

Even in that moment the instinct of the detective asserted itself. He took the bit of paper in such a manner that the figure of the young lady shut off the view of any one within the station building.

Glancing in that direction he saw the face of the young operator standing in the door and looking toward them in a puzzled way. Holding the paper in his closed hand, he said in a low voice.

"That young man is watching us; we will turn our backs upon him and walk slowly away. As we do so, I will read the note."

"Shall I not take your carpet-bag?"

"Consarn it!" he muttered with a laugh, dropping back into his old character, "don't you think I kin carry the hefty thing better than you? I'll keep it in one hand while I manage the bit of paper with the t'other."

As he unfolded the slip, the detective felt that the eyes of the young lady were fixed upon his face and she was studying him

closely. It was evident that what he had said and done mystified her greatly.

"She knows I am no more Peleg Thurman from New Hampshire than I'm Evelyn Clarendon from St. Louis," thought the detective; "but that being so don't tell her who I am. The detective who gives himself away is a fool and don't know his business, but I'm half tempted to tell her that I'm an officer that has been on the hunt for these train-robbers for months, and that I'm going to run them to earth or break a trace in trying to do so."

The confession trembled on his lips, but his natural caution restrained him.

"What shall I gain by revealing myself and telling my business in Texas? The fact is, since I have let her know I've been playing a part, she is likely to make up her mind that I must belong to the profession that is up to that sort of trick. Anyway, I'll wait till I read this note before I go any further on the confessional."

The backs of the couple were toward the station building, from which the agent continued to peer like one whose curiosity threatened to run away with him.

"Father and daughter," he concluded, "but what the blazes brings them into this part of the world is more than I can tell; but I'll bet I'll know before they get away."

Having unfolded the paper, Uncle Peleg was amazed to read the following:

"DEAREST EVELYN:—

"You are shocked to recognize me as one of this band of outlaws. How shall I survive the humiliation of your discovery? But something in your looks as you recognized me gives a faint hope. Do not condemn me till you hear my story. If you are as brave as you used to be—indeed you proved yourself a heroine to-day—and are willing to listen to my story, leave the train at the next station and wait for me. Another train is due there at nine o'clock this evening. It is the through Express, with sleepers and palace cars. Wait at the station for me. I will act as your escort and guardian until you are placed aboard the train."

"I implore you not to refuse this request, which may be the last that I shall ever make. FRED."

CHAPTER VII.

MASHING A MASHER.

SURPRISES followed upon each other's heels with bewildering rapidity.

The wits of the detective were busy, while his eyes were running over this note, and before he looked down in the face that he knew was turned toward his own, he had formed his little theory.

"Miss Clarendon has had a quarrel with a romantic lover. Romantic lover is inclined to be wild; his folks shut down on him; his beloved gives him such a rasping letter that he goes off in a huff; joins the Texan gang of Arkansaw Amos, and helps them in all sorts of deviltry; meets his girl on the train that was just held up; overcome with remorse; begs her to grant him an interview; means to reform; like a true woman she decides to run a big risk and meet him; but he will fool her; more than likely she will be compromised, and the mischief will be to pay generally, but not if I can help it."

Ah, Zigzag, you are a famous detective who has done some marvelous deeds in your time, but all the same you are a human being, and you were altogether off in that little theory of yours.

"Well?" was the inquiring remark of Evelyn, when at last he refolded the piece of paper and handed it back to her.

"What does he mean about your proving yourself a heroine on the train to-day?"

"Oh, it was nothing," she said, half-impatiently.

"But before I talk to you about this matter, I must have the story," he insisted, in his smiling but firm fashion.

Evelyn saw that it could not be helped, and so she told the incident as we have related it, omitting, of course, the complimentary references to herself. Naturally she belittled her own performance, and even ventured to remark that she was so excited that she forgot the danger in which she stood; but, looking up into the kindly face of Uncle Peleg, she saw a tremulous sparkle in his bright eyes.

He was skillful enough to "read between the lines," so to speak, and he realized the splendid deed she had done—it thrilled him to the soul.

"Miss Clarendon," said he, in a husky voice, "let me shake hands with you."

He extended his hand and gave the gloved

one which she laughingly placed at his command a fervent pressure. He said nothing; it was enough; it expressed his fervent admiration more than words could have done. He presumed, however, a minute later, to add:

"As old General Jackson said of Peter Cartwright, the itinerant preacher, if I had ten thousand like you I could capture h—with the earth thrown in."

She laughed and looked slightly displeased at the pointed compliment. He would have been glad to ask her more about "Fred," but he felt too profoundly chivalrous toward her. He could worm a secret from a man, and possibly he might have done the same with her could he have forgotten the chivalry, but he could not. So he wheeled about and the two keeping step, walked side by side toward the railway building.

The agent saw them approaching, and, supposing they meant to enter, moved back; but, while still some distance off, Uncle Peleg said, as he faced the other way again:

"We'll keep beyond hearing of that ambitious youth until we are prepared to talk about something which we would as lief he should hear. Now, Miss Clarendon, since you have honored me with your confidence, I will reciprocate by doing something which I never did before in my life. It is a direct violation of the law of our profession, and the more flagrant because it is made to a woman; nevertheless, here goes: *I am a detective.*"

"You speak as though you expected to overwhelm me with astonishment," she said with a sly laugh, her tiny shoes keeping step to his heavy boots.

"Haven't I surprised you?"

"You did a few minutes ago."

"How?"

"By your words and manner; but when I saw plainly enough that you were *not* Peleg Thurman from New Hampshire, I knew you must be a detective."

"Did you suspect anything else about me?"

"Aware too that you were on a railway train that was robbed by a party of outlaws, I concluded that you were looking for them."

"But it does not signify that because I was on the train I was looking for them; that might have happened to a dozen officers who had no thought of the knaves."

"Of course that supposition could have been wrong; but I am now certain that I was right; was I not?"

"I may as well own up—yes."

"Let it pass at that then; I am free to say that the confidence I felt in you, when you were so kind to me shortly after leaving St. Louis is none the less since I have found that you are altogether a different individual from what I supposed."

"I thank you for that—you shall never regret it. Until I tell you to the contrary I will be your Uncle Peleg, in the presence of others; that is the character which I wish to maintain."

"I will not forget it, and now about myself, or rather—my friend."

"I am ready to give any counsel or help that I can."

"Have I done wise in leaving the train at this deserted station just as night is closing in, at the request of my friend?"

"Unquestionably you did a most unwise thing."

"Explain."

"As bright a girl as you don't need any explanation. Suppose anything should take place to prevent his coming to meet you?"

"A train is due at ten o'clock."

"But in this part of the world the railway trains are rarely on time."

"I could wait in the station."

"A pretty situation for a young and attractive lady—all through the long, dismal night, within a mile of the spot where a gang of the worst kind of desperadoes had robbed a train a short time before."

She shuddered at the picture, and said, in a low voice:

"I did not think of that."

"There is no house within sight; why, I wouldn't leave you in the company of that young scamp inside."

"Why not?"

"You wouldn't be safe."

"Yes, I would," she said, with a flash of those splendid eyes, "every chamber in my pistol is loaded."

"I amend my remark—it's the *youth* who wouldn't be safe, by a large majority."

"He would be if he remained a gentleman—otherwise not."

"Your friend doesn't say when he will be here, but I judge he is due pretty soon," remarked Uncle Peleg, looking around as if he expected to see him walk out of the woods. But he only saw the station agent peering out of the door and wondering what the mischief was the matter with the old man and his daughter.

"Fred didn't do right," added the old gentleman (or rather the gentleman who appeared to be old).

"In what respect?"

"If he is so anxious to see you, why doesn't he go to your home?"

"Oh, he cannot do that now!" she fairly gasped.

"I do not necessarily mean your own house, but to some civilized spot where it would not only be safe for you to meet him with your vail thrown back from your face, but where no one could criticise your action."

"Oh, Uncle Peleg, you do not understand; if you did you would not blame him."

"No explanation can justify his request, though I make no doubt that he meant well."

"That cannot be questioned."

The detective indulged in a quiet smile and thought:

"She's dead gone on him, and he ain't worthy of her, but that's often the case and I'll do all I can for her."

Then he added aloud:

"Well, since you are here, you must of necessity wait for the evening train, which may not be along before morning. If Fred comes you and he can have your talk, and I will see that I am beyond hearing and that no one interrupts you."

"You are too kind, and now suppose we enter the station and seat ourselves."

"I am willing, but beware of that youth there."

"Never fear for me."

"Don't forget that I'm your Uncle Peleg from New Hampshire. Consarn it!" added the detective, raising his voice for the benefit of the youth who seemed somewhat agitated now that the couple were actually entering the little structure and looking for seats, "I don't see why they don't have more trains running on these plaguey roads. Down our way—"

"Don't complain so much, uncle; you've done nothing but growl ever since we left St. Louis—"

"*Shet up!*" interrupted the uncle with well-assumed impatience; "hain't I got a right to express my mind without axing your permission?"

Meanwhile the agent was attempting a desperate flirtation with the handsome young lady, who had grown very meek under the rebuke of her uncle. She turned up her nose at him, but he would not be denied, and coming out of his little office, impudently took his seat alongside of her. She sprung up and placed herself on the other side of her uncle and he followed her.

"What's the use of being so offish?" he asked with a snicker; "you know you want me to sit near you."

Just then Uncle Peleg seemed to get what was going on through his thick skull.

"See here, young man, if you don't behave yourself and let my niece alone, I'll make you; do you hear?"

"Don't be so fresh, old Hayseed; I guess if she and I want to have a little harmless flirtation, you ain't going to get in the way, is he darl—"

Just then Uncle Peleg snatched the impudent youth over his knee as though he were a small child and administered a spanking to the squirming fellow, which made him careful about sitting down for a week after.

"*Thar!*" exclaimed the indignant uncle, shoving him head first into the little room which answered for his office, "I reckon as how you'll behave yerself arter this."

The youth most concerned was inclined to agree in sentiment with Uncle Peleg.

CHAPTER VIII.

A STRANGE RESOLVE.

THE reader may think it singular that Arkansaw Amos and his gang should have allowed the train and its passengers to leave while the safe remained unopened, but they knew that the dispatch which would be sent along the line at the next station (for the friendly operator there would not dare fail to send it) could not start the machinery of the law, so as to endanger his men for several hours to come.

He could not hold the train much longer without causing inquiries to be made which would bring out the truth, and he felt too as if he and his men could work better, if free from the prying eyes and annoying curiosity of the passengers.

So, as we have stated, the gang were left with their dead, for which they cared little, and the safe, for which they cared a great deal. They had the mass of iron prostrate on the ground, like some mailed warrior, and they knew that within that massive armor was fifty thousand dollars, which availed them nothing, however, so long as they could not place their hands upon it.

They had no means of carrying off the safe and hiding it where they could pound it at their leisure, and it had become quite clear that the two sledge-hammers at their command, under the constant swinging of the most powerful arms, could not smash in the door under two or three days at the least.

"Blow it up with powder!" called several.

But how? It couldn't be blown up except by getting gunpowder inside, and there was none in the party ingenious enough to understand how to do that.

Was the holding up of the train, then, a failure? It looked as if it was. True, a good deal of plunder and booty had been obtained from the passengers, but the objective point, so to speak, of the robbers—that is, the fifty thousand dollars—was still beyond their reach.

Like the *ignis fatuus*, it allowed them to come quite close, but it did not permit them to grasp it, and at last, with muttered curses, the gang gave up the job.

Penetrating sullenly into the woods, they halted a few rods away, where they had left their horses tied among the trees. Those who were dead were placed astride of their own beasts and steadied by the others, they moved northward toward a range of hills in which they were accustomed to take refuge, and where many a time they had laughed to scorn all attempts to trace or capture them.

They were in an ugly mood, but there was no help for it. They had many miles to ride, and the sun was setting when the cavalcade turned their backs on the scene of their failure and vanished for the time.

In the mean time matters were taking an interesting turn at the little railway station where Uncle Peleg and his niece had stirred up matters for the somewhat previous agent.

With a fine burst of indignation, the old gentleman, after administering his chastisement, stamped out upon the platform, where his niece joined him, gently expressing some pity for the poor youth who was trying to hide his flaming face.

When some distance down the platform, and while their backs were turned toward the building, both indulged in some of the quietest and most hearty laughter of their lives.

"You were altogether more sudden than I expected," said Evelyn, after she had withdrawn her handkerchief from her mouth.

"And rather more than *he* expected, too, I imagine," said Uncle Peleg, mastering his mirth as best he could; "but it's growing dark, and your friend ought to be along pretty soon."

At the end of the upper part of the rough plank platform, a slightly-traveled road wound in and out among the trees, crossing the single line of rails and losing itself again in the woods on the other side of the track.

As the couple reached that part of the platform, which gave them a view of this highway, they looked up and down, in the hope of catching sight of the expected Fred. The detective did not wish to wound the feelings of the young lady in whom he was interested, but he was suspicious of that same friend of whom she spoke so enthusiastically.

To the officer, there was something ex-

tremely disquieting in his course, in asking her to leave the train at such a lonely and dangerous spot for the sake of granting him an interview, for the men who were engaged in train-robbing were not those as a rule who lived the life of outlaws and avoided the scenes of civilization.

After their deeds of outlawry, it was their custom to doff those garments and to don the raiments of respectable men.

Why did he not do as the detective had intimated—visit her in some place where there was no possible peril of the nature which now threatened her?

He could have done so without the least personal risk; for the noted train-robbers, the James and Younger boys, did not hesitate to spend days, weeks, and even months, in cities and towns. No; despite all his efforts to dissuade himself, the Heart-of-Oak Detective believed that the mysterious Fred was one of the worst of the whole gang; that he was engaged in some plot which boded ill to Evelyn Clarendon.

But, if such were the case, why, it may be asked, did he not take her forcibly from the train and carry her off, when the opportunity for doing so was his?

A few minutes' thought will show the objections to such a step.

In the first place, it would have revealed his true character at once to her, and she would have been repelled where he had the chance to attract. But time alone could tell whether the detective was right or wrong. He had made many astounding discoveries in his time, and he had done things so cleverly that the members of his own profession had spoken words in his praise. But he was human, and as such he had erred more than once, as every human being must do. He might be wrong now—he hoped he was—but he doubted it.

At any rate, Zigzag had the biggest job of his life on hand; for while he had set out to run Arkansaw Amos and his gang to earth, he was equally, if not more, determined to protect Evelyn Clarendon from evil.

Furthermore, he fel a twinge of anguish over a threatened complication; her Fred was a member of the band of outlaws which he was determined to bring to justice.

What was to be done with the delightful Fred when he and the rest should be scooped in?

But sufficient unto the day is the evil thereof. Let the morrow take care of itself; there is enough in the present to keep our brains and hands busy.

For the dozenth time perhaps, after coming out from the station-building, the couple turned in their promenade along the platform when Evelyn, who was just dropping into step, stopped short with a faint gasp and exclaimed:

"There he comes!"

Uncle Peleg turned his head like a flash, and, sure enough, a horseman dashed into view. His blooded animal was on an easy gallop which was checked as he came near the railway tracks, and his rider leaped lightly to the ground, leaving him standing in the highway, without tying.

"Is that he?" asked Uncle Peleg in an undertone glancing searchingly at the countenance of the undeniably handsome young man as the latter scrutinized him.

"Yes," eagerly replied the young lady, trembling with agitation; "I couldn't mistake him among a thousand."

"Very well; you will not forget who I am."

"Have no fear about that."

"I will walk to the other end of the platform and you can have as long a talk as you choose. We have a good while to wait for the next train and you may as well employ it in one way as in another."

And with a grace which his rough exterior could not conceal, he saluted the lady and walked to the other end of the platform. There could be no objection to watching the couple, and it need not be said that Zigzag the detective did that with the keenness and skill of a trained professional.

He saw them stand together a minute or two, talking in low tones, and evidently with an excitement which neither could fully repress. They did not embrace or kiss each other on first meeting, nor indeed did they do so much as shake hands.

Then they began walking slowly back

and forth, talking louder and with more agitation. He tried to catch some of the words but he had voluntarily withdrawn so far, that he could not distinguish a single thing said.

All at once Evelyn walked rapidly toward the detective, who stood motionless at the far end of the platform.

"What's up now?" he asked himself, making no move to meet her.

"Uncle Peleg," said she, tremulous and alarmed, "I'm going away with Fred!"

"If you do you will go to your death," he said, in a low but profoundly earnest voice.

"Nevertheless, I am going!"

CHAPTER IX.

AN UNEXPECTED OPENING.

"Good-bye, Uncle Peleg."

Evelyn Clarendon reached out her gloved hand as she spoke the parting words, but, to her astonishment, her friend refused to take it.

"No," said he sternly, resolved to use all his power to prevent her taking the fatal step.

"What! Uncle Peleg, are you not my friend?"

"Only so long as you are worthy of it."

Her face flushed and a hot retort came to her lips, but she suppressed it, for she felt the justice of the stinging reproof.

"What have I done to forfeit your respect?"

"Nothing, as yet, but you propose to take a step which cannot fail to result in irretrievable disgrace."

"Your words are cruel."

"But just. I was proud of your confidence a minute ago; if you go off with that robber I shall repudiate it."

Evelyn seemed to be irresolute for a minute. Then she compressed her fine thin lips, and, looking him straight in the face, asked:

"Did I not tell you that if you knew all you would not decide against him?"

"I care nothing for him—it is you."

"But if you knew all you would not condemn me."

"It is necessary only to know what you have told to condemn you, as the most foolish of women; even worse than that you are going to ruin with your eyes open; for such there is no excuse."

She turned her head and was silent. During that brief period, which seemed much longer than it really was, Uncle Peleg stood with his face toward the station building so that he observed everything beyond.

He saw the agent come to the door, where he remained in earnest conversation with the escort of Miss Clarendon, their looks and gestures showing that they were talking about him.

At the moment she was about to speak to Uncle Peleg, her escort turned and began walking down the platform toward them.

"What is he coming here for?" asked Peleg Thurman, in a guarded voice.

"I am sure I don't know; I hope he means you no harm."

"I don't care whether he does or not; you ought to know I am able to take care of myself."

"Oh, Uncle Peleg, you would not harm him for the world."

"All he has to do is to keep his hands off, but I don't mean that he shall get the drop on me."

"But Fred had no evil designs against you, I am sure."

As he drew near, he smiled in a way that fully justified the title he bore of Handsome Harry.

"I beg pardon," said he, in a musical voice, "but the agent here tells me that a clergyman called at the station about an hour ago and sent a message."

"Wal, I'll be gol-darned," exclaimed Uncle Peleg, "who ever heerd of a parson doing such a thing?"

Fred laughed so heartily that his fine white teeth shone through his dark-brown mustache.

"It isn't that, but what I wanted to ask was whether you have seen anything of the gentleman?"

"What sort of looking parson was he? Jest let us hear all about it and then I can tell."

Fred turned and beckoned to the agent, who was watching them from his lookout in the door. The young man came forward, though not very ardently.

"Tom, will you please describe that clergyman you were asking me about?"

"Afore you begin," volunteered Uncle Peleg, "I want to say that arter I bid good-bye to the keers, and the passengers, and the robbers, I took a roundabout way through the woods, and I hain't see'd nobody cepting this young woman. Now you can go on and describe the parson and I'll tell you whether I've see'd him."

"Well," replied Fred, still laughing at the quaint old gentleman, "I don't see any use of describing a stranger—that is, after the explanation you've made."

"Him and me has met, howsumever, and have some acquaintance," added Uncle Peleg, nodding his head toward the agent, who blushed and made an excuse to return to his duties some rods away.

"Fred," said Evelyn, "I want a word with you."

"All right, I'll move up to t'other end the platform," kindly offered Uncle Peleg, walking somewhat awkwardly off; "and if you get tired of standin' that I'll shift down here again, keepin' the jig up all night if you want me to."

The old gentleman's walk took him toward the spot where the young man's horse was patiently awaiting him. Looking in that direction, Peleg in the dim twilight caught the outlines of another horse just beyond, his keen eyes enabling him to see that it had a side-saddle on its back.

"The villain has come prepared; I suppose he will persuade her that I am an old fogey, and there's nothing for her to fear. It's the way with her sex."

The sound of steps behind caused him to look around. Evelyn and her friend were walking rapidly toward him, their glowing faces showing that they had formed some decision which they were about to make known to him.

"Uncle Peleg," said Fred, in his cheery manner, "we have made up our mind that you shall go with us."

This was a stunner, and almost took away the breath of the detective.

"Wal, I'll be gol-darned," said he, with a gasp, "what in the name of wonder are you goin' to do with me?"

"Oh nothing, but Evelyn here has taken a great liking to you; she says you are opposed to her going off alone with me—even though it is to be but for a short time—and I don't know but what you are right. So I told her we would invite you to go along. It will only be till morning, for you see she has no baggage except what is in her cabba there, her trunk having gone on to San Antonio. Therefore, it's settled; you'll go with us."

The heart of the detective beat fast, and once more he realized the truth that most of the brilliant successes in his profession are due to accident.

He had come a long ways to try his hand at unearthing or rather running to ground Arkansaw Amos and his gang.

The same thing had been attempted by others, and more than one detective who carefully made his way into the lowlands of Arkansaw or the bush of Texas never came back again, for these desperadoes were up to every trick of the business, and it seemed impossible to entrap them.

The harmless peddler, the country boor, looking for a job, the Irish emigrant, the garrulous old Confederate veteran, the thick-skulled African; no matter what shape the detective took, and no matter how skillfully it was carried out, his personality seemed to be an open book to Arkansaw Amos, Long Lige, Pete Snawley, Si Snork, Jubilee Juggens, and the other members of the band of outlaws, and now, in the most unexpected manner, the path to the retreat of the gang was opened to the wonderful Zigzag, the subtlest detective of them all.

Would he decline because of the danger?

Away down in the heart of that adventurous man, a thought took a shape something like this:

"If the court knows herself, and she thinks she do, something is going to happen with mighty sudden suddenness."

CHAPTER X.

SHADOWED.

"Don't hesitate," added Fred, laying his hand on the arm of the old gentleman; "it's getting dark and we must be off."

"Come, Uncle Peleg," added Evelyn, with a coaxing expression that would have turned the head of an older man; "go, for my sake."

"Wal, I swan to gracious," said the old fellow, with a half-scared laugh, as he took off his hat and mopped his forehead with his red handkerchief, "I didn't count on this 'ere when I left the folks in New Hampshire. I wonder what Peggy'll think of it when I go back and tell her—All right! go ahead!" he added, catching up his carpet-bag, which he had set down on the platform; "but what in thunder are you going to do with me? That is, hain't you got no way for me to ride?"

"I have two horses here," explained Fred, as the three went down the couple of steps at the end of the platform, "one for Evelyn and one for me. If you'll wait, I'll get another for you."

"How fur are you going?"

"About half a mile up the road."

"Pshaw! that's nothing. Afore I had these touches of rheumatics I didn't think nothin' of walkin' ten mild any day; but I say, Mr.—What's your name?"

"Call me Harry."

"How shall I know when I git there?"

"It's a straight road—that is, while the road ain't very straight, it hasn't any crosses that will lead you astray. When you've gone a half-mile, you'll see the glimmer of a lantern from among the trees a pretty good distance back of the road."

"How do you know I will?"

"Because Evelyn and I will ride on ahead, and I'll have the light ready for you."

"What am I to do when I see the lantern? Start and run like thunder?"

"You can run if you want to, but I wouldn't advise you to. The light will swing from right to left as a signal for you to approach it. When you do so you will soon be with Evelyn and me, and perhaps one or two others. It will be on the right hand side of the road and some distance back."

By this time they had reached the spot where the horses stood. Before Uncle Peleg seemed to be able to grasp things, Harry had helped Evelyn into the side-saddle, where, as she took the reins in her small hands, she sat with the grace of a queen of the sawdust ring.

"You'll be right after us," she called, as she struck her black pony into a gallop alongside that of her escort, who waved a good-bye to the old man and told him that he need not hasten, as they had the whole night before them.

"No, I sha'n't hurry," said Zigzag to himself, moving deliberately along the road after the horses, "for things are in that shape that I want the chance to do a little thinking of my own."

The brisk pace at which the couple started carried them almost immediately out of sight of the pedestrian following behind. The station-agent stood at the end of the platform, looking after the muscular old gentleman who had given him such a spanking wished that one of the trees would fall upon and crush him. The sun had hardly sunk out of sight when it was succeeded by the light of the moon. But for the trees that lined both sides of the road, it would have been as easy to see objects several rods distant as if the sun were shining. The stretch of forest, however, in which the railway train was held up covered several hundred square miles, and Uncle Peleg could have walked till morning without striking the open country. Here and there, where the road widened or the trees were fewer in number, enough moonlight reached the ground below to enable one to see a considerable distance up and down the road.

Accustomed as the Heart of Oak Detective was to encounter the keenest-minded criminals in the country, and great as was his skill in defeating and unmasking crime, he was now disturbed by the misgiving that he had opened a fight in which the chances were overwhelming against him. His feeling was that of the pugilist who enters the ring with the absolute certainty that he is about to be vanquished, but his resolution to go ahead was none the less on that account.

"Every one of us has got to pipe a scamp for the last time, and there must be the last time in which I shall shadow any one, but all the same, here goes!"

Perhaps the most uncomfortable suspicion that entered the mind of the detective was that this was not the first time he and "Handsome Harry" had met. There was something in the voice, the manner, the look, the movement, or perhaps in all four that dimly recalled a picture to Zigzag. But the limning of the picture was so faint, so shadowy, so misty and indistinct, that it eluded all effort at identification.

One of the most amazing wonders in this world is that among the billion and more of inhabitants all fashioned after the same model, no two can be found with precisely the same features. There must be strong resemblances, and some of them are so close that they warrant the name of "doubles," but none the less there is a difference.

Might it not be that the detective had never met Handsome Harry before, but instead had seen some one who bore a striking resemblance to him? This was the natural question which the officer asked himself, as he walked slowly along the lonely road. There are some intuitions, however, that are so strong that nothing can overturn them.

"It is not some one that resembles him, but it is he, whom I have met somewhere and at some time that I cannot recall."

And Zigzag compressed his lips and shook his head in a way which proved that there was one point at least on which there could be no doubt in his mind.

"No use," he finally muttered angrily, "memory can't be forced; when it gets ready it will tell me the secret, but not before."

The next natural query was whether Handsome Harry recognized him, but, that was hardly possible, because of the many disguises used by the detective.

Still another cause of disturbance—more indeed than the detective was willing to acknowledge to himself, was Evelyn Clarendon, for try as hard as he chose, he could not fully explain her conduct.

Brilliant, bright, vivacious, beautiful beyond question, with all the marvelous quickness of intuition of her sex, evidently a lady high-born—yet she had left a railway train at the request of a Texan outlaw and had ridden off with him in the woods.

There was something more than love in this; there was mystery beyond his present reach.

"I'll fathom it or die," he muttered with a superstitious belief that it would "die" in his case.

No matter how deep the reverie of Zigzag, he was as alert as an Apache scout, and his senses were always with him.

He had not gone more than a quarter of the distance between the station and the point named by Handsome Harry, when he discovered that he was followed, and there can be no more disturbing feeling than to learn on a dark night and in a lonely part of the country, that some man or animal is stealthily dogging us.

"I wonder whether it's that agent," thought Zigzag, taking advantage of a slight moonlit space to gain a view of the figure or figures whose faint footfalls he had detected.

His pursuers were cautious and for some time he could not gain the coveted glimpse. At last, he succeeded and then saw that instead of one man, it was two who were dogging his footsteps, and neither was the agent and telegraph operator.

"They're after me," decided Zigzag, feeling for his pistols, "and within the next few minutes—there's going to be a fight!"

He was right!

CHAPTER XI.

THE ENCOUNTER IN THE WOOD.

It will be remembered that the Heart of Oak Detective was impersonating an honest old farmer, as he slowly trudged along the lonely road leading through the Texan forest.

He carried an enormous carpet-bag in one hand and he peered to the right and left through his spectacles, as though everything that he saw was a source of wonder to him. Just then, however, his interest lay in the rear.

Two men were stealthily dogging his steps and meant to make an attack upon him. Whether they belonged to the gang of train-robbers or not, could not be told. Conse-

quently, whether they were merely after plunder or were seeking his life was also uncertain.

Zigzag was inclined to believe they were outlaws who, suspecting his identity, were determined to stop him on the threshold, so to speak. The gang of Arkansaw Amos were so on the alert that, as we have shown, it was almost impossible to take them off their guard, and a man whose appearance would not raise the slightest suspicion elsewhere, would be set down as a prowling detective if found in the neighborhood of their headquarters.

Zigzag reflected with a grim smile that one peep into that carpet-bag which he carried would be a dead give away to any one who might feel the least suspicion of him.

There was clothing and the means of effecting several changes that completely disguised his appearance. But it is the audacious course that is often the most successful.

Many a time Zigzag had won by the game of bluff, and he did not hesitate to walk into the enemy's camp, carrying in his hand, so to speak, his own death warrant.

"They're there," said he to himself, as he felt the knobby protuberances of his two hip pockets made by his revolvers.

He had gained a fair view of the two men, enough to show that one of them was large and heavy and the other tall, without being so stout. They wore sombreros, were slouchy of dress, and, judging from appearances, members of the gang of Arkansaw Amos.

More than once the daring detective had said to himself that he was doing an unnecessarily dangerous thing in lugging the carpet-bag with him. Of necessity, he must for some time continue to wear the character he had taken, and more than likely he would have to use it as long as he remained in that part of Texas.

Why, therefore, keep the carpet-bag in his possession?

He settled the question with his usual promptness. Running lightly several rods to the right and deeper into the woods, he placed it at the base of the largest tree he could find. Hastily gathering a few leaves together, he raked them over it, and then hastened back to the highway. There was a possibility of losing the carpet-bag, but not much, and the risk could not well be avoided.

When he returned to the highway he found that, brief as was his absence, it had been noticed by his pursuers. They were on the same side of the road, talking in low tones, the stillness being so profound that, though Zigzag halted fully a rod from them, he overheard everything said.

"Where the blazes has he gone?" asked one, who, standing where the moonlight struck his sombrero, was seen to be gazing in every direction for the missing man.

"He must have found out we was after him, and he has skiped into the woods."

"We oughtn't to have waited so long. Tom told us he was a suspicious character."

"I ain't so sure of that."

"Why not?"

"He was the covey that jumped off the train and run when he thought things was getting too hot for him."

"What's that got to do with it?"

"Nothing—but I seen it and it was too blamed nat'r'l to be put on."

"Bah! the meanest fly could have done that."

"I know, but the way he acted with the gal arterwards and what she told Harry."

"How do you know what she told him?"

"I don't, only from what was done; Harry is too sharp to ask him down to the house unless he was sure of his man."

"Maybe that's the reason he asked him," was the significant comment of the other.

"I believe the same as did Jesse and Frank James—it's best to shoot a dozen innocent men than to run the risk of one gettin' the drop onto you—helloa! yonder he goes now."

"Sure enough—don't let him slip ag'in."

The speakers had caught sight of Uncle Peleg, walking along the road a short distance in advance, as though he had merely stopped to rest a minute or two. The fact was, Zigzag had heard enough to satisfy him. These two worthies were members of Arkansaw Amos's gang, and, inasmuch as there was to be a fight, it might as well come off at once.

As he expected, he had taken but a few steps, when the two ran up to him shouting:

"Up with your hands, old chap! we've got you!"

"What's that?" asked Uncle Peleg, turning half-way round and looking over his shoulder, as if he did not understand what the summons meant.

"Hands up, and right off, too, or—"

The hands of the innocent-looking old fellow did go up, but not quite as high as was commanded, for each hand of the outstretched arm rose to a level with the shoulder, and each grasped a Smith & Wesson whose sharp reports rung out on the still night air, before the outlaw had time to complete the sentence in his mouth.

He who was speaking at that moment staggered backward with a wild yell and sunk heavily to the ground.

His companion gave a quick gasp of pain and fired his weapon at the same instant, but the electric tinge of agony which shot along his pistol-arm, as the bullet of Uncle Peleg plowed its way through flesh and muscle, deflected his own aim. The leaden ball skimmed through the limbs of the trees overhead and Uncle Peleg stood erect and unharmed.

"I'll be gol-darned if I'm going to be talked to in that style. I know my watch ain't worth much, but it's an heirloom in the Thurman family, and I ain't going to give it up without a red-hot fight. Say, be you chaps hurt much?"

"You've finished me," groaned the one who had fallen to the ground.

"I'm mighty glad to hear it, and being as 't other feller seems to be able to keep his pegs, why here goes for him!"

"For God's sake, don't fire!" begged the other, believing that his last moment had come; "you knocked my pistol out of my hand and my arm is good for nothing."

"Which is the same as yourself, but I'll be easy with you, being as you've axed me. Hadn't I better give this other loafer another shot so as to put him out of his misery? That's the way we do with mules and dogs up in New Hampshire when they're hurt so bad that they can't git well."

And the old fellow advanced pistol in hand toward the tough who was painfully trying to climb to his feet.

CHAPTER XII.

THE LIGHT AMONG THE TREES.

BUT Uncle Peleg has no intention of giving the wounded outlaw his quietus. He would have been glad to avoid this encounter, for it threatened to interfere seriously with his plans; but, as has been shown, there was no escaping it, though he might have deferred the struggle.

The two would have followed him to the place where he had agreed to meet Evelyn Clarendon and her escort and the fight would be forced upon him under circumstances less favorable to his own success.

He knew he would have been doing humanity a favor to riddle both of the scoundrels, but he had already wounded them—one seemingly fatally—and it would have revolted his nature to use such an advantage; and that, too, when he was certain that they would have shown him no mercy had the tables been turned.

"All right," remarked Uncle Peleg. "I guess you've had enough with me and I'll bid you good-night with the advice that after this to let your betters alone."

And without another word, he turned and resumed his walk up the road, keeping a sharp watch behind him so long as the two scamps were visible, for next to the sensation of being stealthily followed is the discomfort of expecting every second a shot in the back.

This suspense could not last long, however. A few rods among the shadows of the trees and Uncle Peleg became invisible to his enemies.

What they wished or meant to do could only be guessed.

Since they belonged to the gang, one of whose members he expected to meet in the next few minutes, it would appear inevitable that this encounter should become known, and in such event consequences to say the least would be likely to become unpleasant to himself.

"But the Rubicon has been crossed," mut-

tered Zigzag, compressing his lips and stepping off with the elastic gait natural to him.

The forest seemed to grow thicker and more impenetrable to the moonlight as he advanced, and had he been a superstitious man, he would have been impressed by the dismal gloom of his surroundings. But Zigzag was accustomed to scenes of peril, and found enough difficulty in handling beings of bone and muscle, without bothering himself with ethereal creations lacking substance and definite form.

"Great Caesar!" he exclaimed, tramping forward with the same rapid pace, "but that girl has got nerve to ride over such a road as this at night, even in the company of one she believes in. Helloa again! This road seems to be traveled more than I supposed," he added, as the sound of a horse's hoof was heard, this time in front.

"I suppose he's another one of the party," was the conclusion of Zigzag, as he stepped from the wood and took position alongside a tree. "It's lucky, however, that it's so dark there's no danger of his seeing me."

Such was the fact, but, at the same time, the detective would have preferred that there should have been enough light for him to obtain a glimpse of the stranger.

"I wonder whether it can be Harry returning for me? I hope not, for it might mix matters."

At the particular point where Zigzag had halted, the gloom was so deep that when the horseman was within ten feet, neither he nor his animal could be seen; but as the two came opposite, Zigzag was able to catch the barest possible outlines of the horse's head and neck, and the broad-brimmed sombrero worn by the rider. The animal's sense of smell told him that which his eyesight failed to make known. He knew that some man was near, for he neighed slightly, started and shied to the opposite side.

"What's the matter?" asked his rider, jerking the rein impatiently; "don't make a fool of yourself, Bob."

That was not the voice of Handsome Harry.

"He's a stranger," concluded Zigzag; "I will not challenge him."

A minute later the sound of the horse's hoofs died out, and Uncle Peleg resumed his journey. Before long the woods became more open, though there was no marked decrease of vegetation.

"It's pretty near time I caught sight of that signal that Harry promised should be shown—helloa! there it is!"

Some distance to the right he caught the star-like twinkle of a point of light, slowly oscillating back and forth like a pendulum. The intervening limbs and trees partly shut it out at times, but the arc made by the illumination could be plainly traced.

"That's it, sure enough. Well, I'm in for it, and there's nothing to be gained by waiting."

The detective could see nothing in the nature of a road or path, though it is to be supposed that something of the kind existed. Neither was there a fence for him to climb. Indeed, he had seen no fence since leaving the railway station. The ground was soft, and he found little difficulty in picking his way toward the light, which continued to swing back and forth with the regularity of a piece of machinery.

"I should think he would shout or whistle, but there's no need of that, since the light would be more likely to attract attention."

A short distance further, and the officer was able to distinguish the outlines of a small cabin, such as are common on the frontier. The ground immediately surrounding had been cleared of trees, so that the view he gained was better than he expected, but instead of going directly forward and presenting himself, Detective Zigzag followed a cautious course, which was characteristic of that skillful officer.

He now picked his way with the stealth of an Apache. Though most of the trees had been cut down, there was a growth of bushes by the aid of which, when he crouched low he was able to steal forward without being discovered.

He was anxious to gain a glimpse of the party who was swaying the lantern, for he had a suspicion that, it was neither Harry nor his fair companion, and this suspicion proved correct.

A low, covered porch ran in front of the

small house and on this some one was standing and swinging the light. Behind this party, but a little to one side, was a window through which a light was shining, though the lynx-eyed detective could not from his stand-point, gain a view of the interior.

A little closer approach along the end of the porch solved the puzzle as concerned the one who was swinging the lantern. It was a large negress.

She was standing erect, swaying the light back and forth, in such a way that the "amplitude of the vibrations," as the proper term goes, was so extended that the yellow glare was thrown for an instant against her sooty features.

The glimpse was brief and dim that the officer was able only to make sure that it was a black woman of herculean build and strength.

"All right," he said to himself; "now I will take a look at the rear provided there are no dogs in the way."

He had a natural dread of those canines, not because he could not quickly give the quietus to any one that might molest him, but, as will be seen, it was likely to prove awkward in other respects.

Gradually he worked his way around to the back of the cabin, and ran against no four-footed enemy. His heart gave a throb of hope as he saw that the light within was thrown through a rear window against the shrubbery and undergrowth.

"That looks as if I may learn something worth knowing," was his exultant thought.

CHAPTER XIII.

THE LONELY CABIN AND ITS INMATES.

THE occupants of the lonely cabin must have felt quite secure from observation, for the curtain of the window was drawn aside, so that the detective had a good view of the interior.

The location of the house would seem to warrant such belief, and peering cautiously into the room, the detective saw that which deeply interested him.

The apartment was small and with scarcely any furniture deserving the name. A deal table, several chairs and a couple of cheap prints on the wall constituted about all. There was something cheerful, however, in the looks of the old-fashioned fire-place, in which, on this cool autumn night, a few sticks were burning, their light adding to the illumination of the two candles that sat on the table in the middle of the room.

In one corner a step-ladder passed through the opening above, doubtless constituting the "stairs" leading to the upper story.

In one of the plain, hard-bottomed chairs at the end of the table sat Evelyn Clarendon, and in the chair at the opposite end was Handsome Harry, or Fred Ripley, his proper name.

She was leaning on the table in an easy, graceful posture, for indeed it seemed impossible for her to do anything that was not graceful and becoming, and the young man and woman were looking in each other's faces and talking earnestly.

Though viewed from a little greater distance it would have seemed that they were holding an ordinary conversation, yet a closer look told a far different story. His face was flushed, and there was a strange gleam and glitter in his eyes. Unquestionably, his feelings were wrought to a high point.

The first glance which the detective cast upon that wonderfully beautiful face told him that she had been weeping. Even now the diamond-like sparkle at the corner of the eyes and the occasional use of her fine handkerchief proved that she had not yet acquired the mastery of her emotions.

In the utter stillness that reigned without, it was an easy matter for the listener to catch every word uttered by the couple. Uncle Peleg might have felt too chivalrous to play the cowen, but it was not Uncle Peleg that was doing so. It was Zigzag, the detective, and to play the eavesdropper, is the first principle of the detective's profession.

"What a strange place for me to be," said she, with something like a reaction of merriment, which will come over a person in the most depressing moments.

She smiled faintly as she spoke, and looked around the room. He answered in the same vein, glancing at the rough ceiling.

"It is hardly what you have been accustomed to—that is true, but it is better than all out doors."

The two had evidently finished a serious talk, and the detective had some misgivings that it would not be renewed.

"Are you sorry you came, Evelyn?"

"Yes and no."

"Why yes?"

"Because I have met you."

"Why no?"

"Because I have failed."

"Failed in what?"

"In reclaiming you from this life."

"But I intend to quit it."

"When?"

"Sooner than you suspect."

"But not as soon as I wish."

"When do you wish me to quit?"

"Now—at once—right off—this very minute."

"But I have told you, Evelyn, that that is impossible."

"I do not believe it."

"It is true, nevertheless."

"When should the murderer stay the uplifted hand," she asked, sitting erect, and with an indignant flash in her glorious dark eyes, "if not on the instant? What plea is it for him to make that he must commit a few more crimes before changing his life? What would the judge say to the prisoner whom he had once trusted, if he pleaded that he had to burn down down a few more houses, with their occupants, before he could quit his crimes?"

"Evelyn," said the young man, with a burst of admiration, "you have a splendid way of putting things; it would be hard to improve on that."

"It is not the way of putting things, but it is the truth."

The young lady now became dramatic. Shaking her forefinger, so as to emphasize each word, she fixed her blazing orbs upon the flushed countenance of her friend and slowly said:

"Frederick Ripley, you have committed enough crime; you are a young man, but you are not too young to sin away the day of grace. I know that if you do not heed my warning it will soon be too late."

This utterance ought to have impressed any one, and it did so, but not in the manner desired.

The attractive mouth of Fred Ripley expanded, and he broke into a light laugh, which grated like a file upon the feelings of the listener.

"The dog!" thought the angered detective, "what man can listen unmoved to such an appeal?"

The laugh roused the indignation of Evelyn. Her bosom heaved and she looked the scorn she could not express.

"I beg your pardon," said he, reading her emotion, "but I cannot help it."

"The rattlesnake cannot help biting."

"No—not when he is trodden upon, but one of these days, my dearest, you will laugh as heartily as I."

"I beg you not to presume to speak for me."

He now became more earnest. Leaning forward on the table, so that but a few inches separated his face from the astonished countenance of the lady, he spoke with the utmost solemnity.

"Evelyn, you think me heartless and jesting about that which it would be a sin to jest upon. Will you promise me one thing?"

"No—not until I know what you ask."

"It is that you will believe I mean every word that I am about to say?"

She seemed disposed to refuse. But something in the depth of the handsome eyes fixed so yearningly upon her own, warned her that it would be perilous to deny the request.

"Yes, I believe you are in earnest."

"True, I am a member of the gang of outlaws led by Arkansaw Amos, one of the worst desperadoes in the country."

"I learned that to-day, when our train was robbed."

"And when you shamed every one else by your splendid courage. Evelyn, suppose it had been I whom you shot?"

"I wish it was, and that I never could

have known your identity," was her bitter reply.

"Evelyn!"

There was a world of reproach and sorrow in the word. She shut her lips tight and flashed her anger; but, she was a woman all the same. Her lips quivered, the eyes filled and the lace handkerchief suddenly went to them.

"There, there," said her friend soothingly, "never mind, Evelyn, perhaps it would have been better had you shot me down, for whose life is so valuable that the world wouldn't be the better for having it snuffed out? I am glad to see you mistress of yourself again."

By a great effort, she repressed the tempest of agitation and, dashing the moisture from her eyes, looked calmly into the face before her.

CHAPTER XIV.

AN IMPRESSIVE INTERVIEW.

"EVELYN," said Fred, punctuating each word with the dip of his forefinger, "I repeat what I said, that I *cannot* quit the company of these men for some time yet."

"And I repeat that I do not believe a word of it."

"But what did you promise just now?"

"To credit your sincerity, but not the truth of your statements. It is hard to believe you are honest, but I will not refuse that."

"I say again that I cannot quit their company."

"You have repeated it so often that I beg you to do so no more."

"But I shall quit them."

"When?"

"I cannot say."

"I can."

"Then do you think it will be?"

"Never."

"That is a long time."

"Unless you are soon shot or hanged."

"But, Evelyn, I must finish what I set out to say, even at the risk of tiring you by repetition. I shall quit the company of these men just as soon as possible, and that time is not yet. When I do quit them, I shall tell you a secret which will fill you with self-reproach for the injustice you have done me."

She sadly shook her head and then suddenly stopped, for a startling suspicion had darted into her brain. Her eyes expanded, and she stared at her lover as though she would look him through and through.

"Can it be?" she asked herself; "is Frederick—no—n—no—I am mistaken; what put such a thought into my head?"

It had passed as quickly as it came.

"Fred," said she, mournfully, "nothing is easier than for you to talk in this strange fashion. I have promised to believe that you mean what you say, but really you must not make too great drafts on my credulity."

"Let me finish. When the time comes in which you shall know all (and God grant that it may come soon!) instead of condemning, you will approve my course—"

She curled her lip, turned her head aside and waved her hand for him to cease. But he persisted:

"I know I have not been a model saint, and your eyes have looked upon me with a charity equal to that of my mother; but you have been forced to condemn; before your next birthday comes round you will say, 'Fred, I did you an injustice; you builded better than I knew; you did well!'"

"You know how easily you can win my commendation, that is if you consider it worth winning—"

"I value it above that of every human being, and second only to that of my God."

He looked reverently upward, and beyond question was in earnest, but Evelyn was only shocked.

"You have but to do a simple thing."

"I know what it is, but I *cannot* do it just yet."

"Our two horses have been tethered among the trees, and are within easy reach; we can ride all night; if you suspect the agent at the station might betray us—"

"Why do you think he would betray us?"

The young man broke in so sharply with this interruption, that Evelyn was startled.

It convinced her that the fellow who had been trounced by Uncle Peleg, was in sympathy with and probably a member of the gang of outlaws; but she based what she said simply on the impression which Uncle Peleg gave her. If she should make that known, it would turn the suspicion of Fred against him, and suspicion under such circumstances meant the death warrant of the old gentleman.

With that astonishing quickness which was characteristic of her, she parried the question with great skill.

"I said if you *suspected* him! I know nothing of him. I was about to ask what is to prevent our riding the horses to the next station, which cannot be many miles away, and there take the train north to our home. Will you answer me?"

"You ask me not to repeat what I have said, and to answer you would compel me to do so."

The young man now leaned his head on his hand and looked down at the floor as if in deep thought, while Evelyn closely studied his face.

"He is giving audience to Conscience," was her thought, but in that belief she was mistaken.

She had removed her gloves, and she now reached her small, delicate, white hand across the table and took hold of his which was supporting his head. He did not resist, but kept his eyes on the floor.

"My gracious!" thought the detective, who was drinking in the words and the scene, "how can he—how can *any one* resist such an appeal? It would subdue a Comanche!"

Ah! if Evelyn could have known what thoughts were running through that brain! And Zigzag, the detective; could he have turned himself into a Bishop for a single moment only, and read the mind of the handsome young man, what a transformation his emotions would have undergone!

But they could not know—not yet, not yet.

Evelyn fondled the hand for a minute or two, during which Fred sat gloomily looking down at the floor. Suddenly he raised his eyes, and the watchful detective saw they had tears in them.

"Evelyn can you keep a secret with your life?" he asked, in a voice so low that the eavesdropper could hardly catch the words.

"If you choose to tell it to me I will die before I will make it known to any one."

The heart of Zigzag gave a flutter; he was sure he was on the eve of an astounding discovery.

Such, indeed, it would have been, had Fred Ripley given utterance to just four words that were trembling on his lips, and which, strangely enough, the detective himself had spoken but a short time before; but, before pronouncing them, he uttered several others.

"Evelyn, if I tell you this secret, I shall violate a pledge that I have taken, and which ought to be binding."

"Why do you wish to violate it?"

"To compel you to say right here and now, 'Fred, forgive me for wronging you?'"

"You are acting and talking very strangely," said Evelyn, with a sigh; "I confess there seems to be something which I do not understand; but if you must violate a solemn pledge to make me respect you, then you will lose my respect through the very means you take to secure it. No; keep your secret, because it is bound by a sacred promise."

The listener at the window ground his teeth. On the very threshold of hope he was baffled.

"Very well; I shall bide my time," decided Fred, with a sigh; "the hour for you to know all may come soon—it may come late—it may never come."

"It has come for me to know far more than I ever wished to know," said she, bitterly.

"It seems to me," added Fred, starting up, as though he wished to rid himself of the distressing subject, "that it is time that that Uncle Peleg, as you call him, arrived."

It was at this juncture, while the alert Zigzag was peering in at the corner of the window and greedily listening to every syllable, that he made the fearful discovery that he was not the only one who was doing the same thing!

CHAPTER XV.
A FLANK MOVEMENT.

THE HEART OF OAK DETECTIVE had been in many perilous situations, but up to date he had extricated himself without serious harm, though he bore upon his person the mark of more than one pistol bullet and knife-thrust.

A wonderful quickness of mind, a skill in the use of nature's weapons and those of art, and marvelous resources, trained by years of experience, enabled him to succeed where most other men would have failed. Like the trained Indian scout, he never forgot the danger of his surroundings, in the intensity of interest in what was going on before his eyes.

While peering through the rear window of the lonely cabin, and listening with breathless interest to the singular words passing between Evelyn Clarendon and Fred Ripley, he became aware that another person was at his elbow.

Never did the detective show more admirable skill and subtlety than in his manner of meeting the new danger. He turned his head only enough to allow him to see the figure, without allowing the latter to know it, but he was relieved to find that instead of a man, it was the huge negress with the lantern.

She had evidently just caught sight of him, and was standing with open mouth and staring eyes. Her masculine strength gave her a certain courage which prevented her being frightened at the sight of a man. She was certain, however, to give expression to her feelings very quickly.

Without waiting for her to do so, Zigzag fumbled along the sides of the log with his hand, as if searching for something.

"Consarn it!" he growled, loud enough for her to hear; "I wonder if there ain't any door to this house. Mebbe the folks come down the chimbly like the savages that I read about when I went to school."

He fumbled a little more and then started back.

"Wal, I'll be darned, if this ain't a winder; it must be that the house has got twisted round, or mebbe I have—"

At that instant the negress broke into a chuckling laugh which shook her body like a tub full of jelly.

"Who the blazes are *you*?" demanded Uncle Peleg, staring at her in astonishment; "do you belong here?"

"I reckons I does, boss; you'm the biggest fool that I ever see'd."

"Darned if I don't think you're 'bout right."

"Am you lookin' for the door, boss?"

"That's what I am; has the blamed old house got any door?"

"It hab, but it am on de oder side."

"Haw! haw! haw!" laughed Uncle Peleg, "wasn't I an old fool? Let's go round to the front, 'cause the folks are expecting me."

"Am you de man dat I war to swing de lantering fur?" asked the negress, leading the way and holding up the light so that she could look into the honest countenance of the stranger.

"I reckon I am, 'cause Harry and the lady told me to foller 'em along the road and I would know where the house was by the swinging of the lantering."

"Wal, why didn't ye do it, boss?" I swung dat ole lantering till my arms ached; didn't you see it?"

"How could I see it when I come round to the back of the house? It was so consarned dark in the woods that I must sorter lost my way. Bimeby I catches sight of a light among the trees. 'Helloa!' says I, 'that must be the place I'm looking for. So I started ahead, catched my toe in a darned old running vine that brought me down ker-slap on my face and, well, here we are!"

By this time, they had stepped upon the porch which ran along the front. The sound of their voices reached those within, and Handsome Harry as he was called, came to the door and opened it.

"Helloa! glad to see you, Uncle Peleg," said he, extending his hand; did you have any trouble in finding the place?"

"Wal, I should say I did; I sorter got scared in the woods, lost my way and run against the back of the house; while I was feeling for the handle of the door-bell this

colored lady come up and showed me the way."

Dinah, as she was called, raised the lantern to a level with her ebon face, twisted the bottom off, and gave a puff which extinguished the stump of a candle. Then she threw back her head and let out a burst of laughter which might have been heard a quarter of a mile away.

There was something so hearty in her mirth that it caused Harry and Evelyn, who had followed him to the door, to join her, though of course, only to a partial extent. The comicality of the scene was increased by the sober, wondering stare which Uncle Peleg, standing with his foot on the threshold fixed upon her.

"Wal, I'll be shot, if that mouth ain't a leetle ahead of an alligator's," he said. Then turning about with the same solemn countenance, he extended his hand to Evelyn and said:

"How do you deu? I'm right down glad to see you and Harry, I b'lieve they call you—I'm glad to shake hands with *you*."

After this pleasant greeting, the three entered and seated themselves.

"Dinah, here, gave us a light lunch before you came," said Harry, "and she'll be glad to do the same for you."

"I was thinking all the way here that there was something that I had forgot, but it never come to me till this minute and I'll be consarned if it ain't my supper." Dinah, being's it's you, I don't mind if I do take a bite."

The negress, who clearly had taken a fancy to the old fellow, soon placed some delicious corn bread and rather good butter on the table. The tea that had been taken from its perch over the fireplace was still quite hot, so that Uncle Peleg made a much better meal than he expected to get in such a place.

All this time a general conversation was going on, but only a portion of it was worth giving.

"Evelyn," said Uncle Peleg, after the meal was finished, "I s'pose you told Harry here about the little fuss we had with the agent down at the station."

"Yes," and he laughed heartily.

"So did *us*, but we mustn't try the little lie onto Harry about my bein' your *real* uncle."

"Oh, no, I understand how you became acquainted on the cars," said the young man; "and I consider it fortunate that she met you."

"I'm obleeged to you, sir; be you going to make your hum here in this mansion?"

"I guess not," said Evelyn with a laugh; "I intend to go back to the station tomorrow morning, and take the Express South; will you act as my escort?"

"I'll be all-fired glad to do so—you can depend onto that. Harry, do you live here?"

"Sometimes, but not as a general rule; I don't expect to be here after you go away."

"Going South with us, I s'pose?"

"No," he laughed, seeming to feel that a typical New Englander was before him; "my business calls me in another direction."

"Raisin' cattle, mebbe?"

"No, though I sometimes do a little farming."

Harry good-naturedly parried a number of similar questions, until the hour was advanced, when he suggested that all should retire.

"Miss Clarendon and Dinah will occupy the upper room, while you and I, Uncle Peleg, will have to accommodate ourselves down here."

"I can bunk anywhere," was the cheery response of the old gentleman, as he bade Evelyn good-night and saw her climb the ladder after Dinah, who carried the guiding candle in her hand.

CHAPTER XVI.

IS HE ASLEEP?

AFTER the withdrawal of Evelyn and the negress, Uncle Peleg and Harry sat for a half hour in conversation, but nothing of account passed between them—at least nothing worthy of record in this place.

The detective maintained his assumed character of a New England farmer on a prospecting tour in Texas, with as much

skill as Denman Thomson himself could have done.

The handsome young outlaw answered or parried his numerous questions with the same pleasant deftness that he had shown earlier in the evening.

But it may as well be said that this seemingly pointless conversation was extremely important in one respect to both, for each became aware that the other was studying him.

With all the marvelous acuteness of Zigzag, however, he did not learn, or at least he was not certain, that his *vis-a-vis* was engaged at the same task with himself.

The time came sooner, however, than he could have anticipated when the alarming truth was manifest. Through all the talk ran the exasperating certainty that the two had met somewhere before. It was no fancied resemblance of form, face, feature, voice or manner.

That man—that member of Arkansaw Amos's band of outlaws, met Zigzag not for the first time that afternoon, but the tantalizing feature of this conviction was that the Heart of Oak Detective was utterly unable to recall when or under what circumstances the meeting had taken place. When confronted by similar puzzles before, he had never failed to solve them, but now he could not; but at last with a prodigious yawn, Uncle Peleg said:

"Wal, I'll be consarned, if I can keep my eyes open any longer; I s'pose that that blanket in the corner was meant by Dinah for me."

"Yes, you take that and I'll take the other; I won't lie down just yet."

"Wal, good-night," said Uncle Peleg, who, removing only his coat, which he folded up for his pillow, stretched out on the blanket, half of which lay beneath and the other half over him.

Apparently in the most natural manner in the world, he lay with his face turned toward the fire. In this position he could see every movement of his companion and note the play of his features.

Handsome Harry, or Fred Ripley, as was his true name, leaned back in one chair with his feet resting on another, and slowly smoked a cigar, so fragrant that Uncle Peleg envied him. He smoked slowly, with his eyes fixed on the smoldering fire. It was plain that he was thinking deeply upon some subject of great importance to himself.

Ay, and of great importance to the fair lady sleeping so sweetly up-stairs, and of importance to the detective who was pretending to sleep below stairs.

Ah, could he but have known the thoughts that were surging through the brain of that remarkable personage!

Uncle Peleg, in the course of a few minutes, gradually closed his eyes, mumbled to himself, and then breathed with the deep regularity of a sleeping man.

But he was never more wide-awake in all his life, and through the partly-closed lids he was studying Fred Ripley.

The latter calmly puffed his cigar, holding it most of the time between his thumb and forefinger, and with his eyes fixed upon the glowing coals.

Suddenly he turned his head and stared so searchingly at the prostrate figure, that the latter had hard work to hide the start it gave him.

It seemed for a swift minute as if he would look Uncle Peleg through, his demeanor and action being those of a man full of furious hate, and who meditated leaping upon the sleeper.

"Uncle Peleg!"

He spoke in a low voice, a husky whisper indeed, but there was no answer. The outlaw repeated the call in a louder voice and still there was no answer. Finally he spoke a third time, loud enough to be heard upstairs, had either of the females been awake, but Uncle Peleg gave no sign that his slumber was disturbed.

As gently as a tiger could have withdrawn his paw from beneath his body, the outlaw drew his revolver from his hip pocket, and placing his cigar between his even, white teeth, and with the same fierce glare in his eyes, he leveled the weapon at the prostrate figure.

Now was the time for Uncle Peleg, who noted every movement, to bound to his feet

and confront his enemy, but no infant on its mother's breast could have slumbered more serenely than he seemed to sleep.

With the same regular, half-wheezing noise, the breath continued to pass through the nostrils of the pretended sleeper, and all the time, the fire-light fell on the burnished pistol barrel, whose bullet when fired, must have bored its way through the skull of Uncle Peleg.

But the latter gave no sign of fear. It may have been that his pulse beat a little faster, but, if so, no one besides himself was aware of the fact.

The weapon was not discharged, and with a grim smile, the outlaw shoved it back in his pocket, whispering as he did so.

"He sleeps, sure enough."

Uncle Peleg read the meaning of the demonstration from the first.

Any person can feign slumber by pretending not to hear the words addressed to him, but who can withstand such an ordeal as that which we have just described?

Not many, it will be admitted, but Zigzag was one of them.

Handsome Harry now took the candle from the table near him, snuffed it with his fingers, so as to increase its light, and with it in hand walked toward the prostrate figure.

This time he took some precautions to prevent himself being heard, and his heavy boots pressed the floor almost as lightly as if he had been in his stocking feet.

Stopping beside Uncle Peleg, he bent over and holding the candle near his face, studied his features with the closeness of a physician searching for some sign of a dreaded infectious disease.

A brief survey satisfied him, when he resumed his seat and his cigar. It would have been the most natural thing for him to give some expression to his thoughts, when assured that the words could not be overheard, and indeed Zigzag rather expected him to do so, but again he was disappointed.

The outlaw, whatever his musings might have been, kept them to himself, but there could be no longer any doubt of an alarming fact; despite the unquestioned skill of Zigzag in personating the New England farmer, he had not been able to divert suspicion from himself.

Despite, too, the peculiarly favorable manner in which he made his entrance into the hostile territory, as the friend of Evelyn Clarendon, the lover of the latter was not satisfied with him.

"These scamps are so suspicious," thought Zigzag, "that no one can fully deceive them."

At this moment, the outlaw made a startling movement. He had laid off his coat, earlier in the evening. He now took it from the peg on the wall, donned it again, buttoning it up to the chin as though anxious to protect himself from the cold. It looked as if he was going to leave the cabin, which was the fact.

CHAPTER XVII.

ARKANSAW AMOS.

WITHOUT so much as glancing at the figure on the floor, the outlaw walked to the door, opened it and passed out.

Instantly the detective's eyes expanded to their widest extent. He yearned to follow the man, but durst he do it?

Like the red Indian, who detects the proximity of his foe, through the aid of the ground, Zigzag removed his folded coat from beneath his head and pressed his ear against the floor of the cabin.

It was as he expected. The outlaw was walking softly back and forth on the porch outside.

When the head was raised clear of the floor, the footfall could not be heard, but when the ear was pressed against the planking, the sound was unmistakable.

After all, this was another test to which Handsome Harry was putting his lodger.

If through all that has been told, he was playing 'possum, and, if after all, he was a detective, his instinct would show itself when the party whom he was piping, passed out of the cabin.

Most detectives would have fallen into the trap, but Zigzag did not. His impulse was immediately to follow the villain before he could get away, but his training forbade.

For fully ten minutes, Harry continued

walking softly back and forth on the porch and then he stopped.

Zigzag now fixed his gaze on the door, and as he did so, he saw the latch gently lifted. Instantly, his lids came close together, but it need not be said that his vision was never more acute in all his life.

Unlike most doors, this one was capable of moving silently on its hinges. It was shoved a few inches inward, absolutely without any noise, and then the firelight and the yellow glow of the candle showed the eyes, the nose and the front of the face of Handsome Harry, who was looking at Uncle Peleg.

There can be little doubt that the view was satisfactory, for the door was once more closed, and now the ear glued against the plank floor caught no sound of measured footsteps. Evidently the outlaw had given up his pacing to and fro.

"Now he will start off on his tramp, wherever he may go," concluded Zigzag; "and will it do for me to shadow him? I wouldn't mind it in New York or St. Louis, but it's mighty risky business out here in the Texas wilds."

He was convinced that after his man stepped off the porch, he would look behind him to see whether the door was opened or not. The light within the room would bring out in prominent relief the figure of any person who appeared in the doorway.

But Handsome Harry had not stepped off the porch. A slight movement told Zigzag that he was still standing near the door.

"He's a sly dog," was the rightful conclusion of the officer; "he doesn't mean to take any chances—but, 'sh!'"

What was that which the listening ear caught?

A low, tremulous whistle like the call of a bird went out on the night-air, and it was emitted, too, by the lips of Handsome Harry, standing just outside the door.

That it was a signal to some one there could be no doubt, and could there have been any question, it was removed when the wonderfully keen ears of Detective Zigzag caught the almost inaudible response, from a point a short distance off.

"Ah, ha," he concluded, "we are going to have visitors."

A minute later, the soft footfall of a person was heard as he stepped upon the porch. Although the night was quite cool, they sat down with their backs against the broad columns, so that they faced each other, both smoking.

With a thrill of pleasure, Uncle Peleg found he could hear every word spoken, and this pleasure was deepened when the two addressed each other.

"Is that you, Harry?"

"Yes—and that is you, Arkansaw?"

"It is."

This showed that the visitor was no other than Arkansaw Amos, the leader of the gang of train-robbers. His voice was gruff, but he spoke distinctly.

"Is he inside?" asked the leader, doubtless referring to the visitor who was stretched on the floor.

"Yes, he's there," was the reply of Harry.

"Why didn't you wing him?"

"Because he's all right."

"How do you know that?" demanded Arkansaw, gruffly.

"I'm sure of it. In the first place, Miss Clarendon vouches for him. She came all the way from St. Louis in his company, and he's an honest old codger from New England."

"Bah! any of 'em can pretend that."

"But he isn't pretending it. She became well acquainted with him and I've examined him as closely as if under a microscope."

"What made him jump out of the cars and run this afternoon?"

"He was scared half to death. He ran for the station and would have boarded the train and gone on with it, if he hadn't been too late."

"Why didn't he take the next train?"

"We was waiting for it, when he found Miss Clarendon there. He would have gone, if he hadn't got mad because she decided to come here with me. Then she asked me to bring him along so he could act as her escort if things go rather lively to-morrow, as they are likely to do. He's going back with her in the morning."

"I'm glad to hear that, though I don't feel exactly right. However, if he is one of the detective hounds, I don't see as he can do any harm; he ain't going to get a chance to learn anything."

"Of course not; day after to-morrow he'll be in Santone," said Harry, using the common pronunciation of that name in Texas; "that is, if some burro doesn't eat him up."

All this was welcome information to the listener, but still more important tidings were coming.

"Well, we made a rather bad mess of it to-day," added Harry.

"I should say we did," growled Arkansaw Amos, with another of his blistering expletives; "three of the boys here passed in their checks, to say nothing about Sam, who was hit hard."

Arkansaw Amos had evidently not heard of the little affair which two of his men had with Uncle Peleg down the road.

"And we couldn't manage the safe after we got it."

"No; I reckon we mought pound the blamed old thing for thirteen years and a half without making a dent in it. What an outrage it is that they should make the safes so—strong. But say, Harry, is that old covey asleep?"

"Sleeping like a log; I don't believe a cannon-shot would wake him. I proved he was asleep."

"I don't know as he could hear us anyway."

"No, we'll talk as low as we can."

They lowered their voices, so that it required extra attention on the part of the cowen to catch their utterances, but he managed to do so all the same.

"I have the rest of the boys scattered?"

"Most of 'em have, and we'll have to light out to-morrow."

"Where will they go? To the Devil's Den?"

"They'll head that way, and ought to reach there some time to-night or early to-morrow."

"I don't suppose they'll slide the boys under till they are a good ways out."

"No; they'll plant 'em over on 't other side of the ridge."

"Let's see; the den is just twenty miles from here due north isn't it?"

"That's about the size of it."

"And we're all to be there by to-morrow night. I suppose we'll stay there for three or four days."

"Maybe, if it's safe."

It may strike the reader that Handsome Harry was dealing out valuable information in a reckless manner, which spoke bad for his discretion but the reader is requested to suspend judgment for awhile.

Then he will hear "something drop."

CHAPTER XVIII.

A DREADED ARRIVAL.

"I DON'T believe it will do for us to hang around here long," remarked Harry.

"No; in these days of telegraphs, it'll be knowed all over the country to-morrow."

"The governor and the railroad will offer big rewards, and they'll go for us like so many bloodhounds."

"Bah! who cares? Ain't we used to it? Texas is too big a State for them to run us down."

"If necessary we can skip over into Arkansaw."

"Yes, all the people are our friends. Money wouldn't tempt any of 'em to squeal. They'll send us word if anything turns up and you know there ain't much going on that 'Tom, down at the station, won't learn in time to give us the tip."

This was confirmatory of what, as will be remembered, Uncle Peleg suspected all along. The telegraphist with whom he had his little flurry was in with the gang.

The two now smoked a few minutes in silence. Then the detective heard a slight noise which he knew was made by one of the men rising to his feet.

The next moment the door was softly opened. The fire had burned so low and the candle had such a big "thief" in it, that there was little light in the room.

But there was enough to show the detective a pair of eyes peering through the few inches of space, and scrutinizing him with deep interest. Zigzag was convinced, too, that the

eyes belonged to the gentleman known as Arkansaw Amos.

"He's all right," said the leader, after resuming his seat on the porch, "though I'll be hanged if I wouldn't feel better if he was a hundred miles away."

"Fudge! what's the use of thinking about it? How many will there be at Devil's Den to-morrow?"

"When you and me are there, with the boys who wasn't with us to-day—and I've sent 'em word that they must be on hand—there'll be just thirteen."

"What time are you going to start?"

"At daylight; and you?"

"I won't be far behind you; I suppose we follow this road out, and at the cross-road turn to the right and keep to the trail till we get there?"

"Of course. What do you mean by going over the route in your mind when you've been over it a hundred times on hossback?"

"I thought you might have hit on the more roundabout course, that is to turn off at the second trail, six miles out."

The listening Zigzag was astonished and puzzled to hear one of the outlaws give himself and companions away in this fashion. It was so contrary to the acumen and caution he had shown from the first that it was beyond understanding at that time, but a most startling explanation was to reach the detective before another sun could rise and set.

"I'll have to give some attention to Miss Clarendon, you know," added Harry, by way of explanation for his waiting to-morrow until after the departure of his chief.

"That's a little the worst piece of business I ever knowed you to get into, Harry. You've got a weak spot in your heart for the women, haven't you?"

"No; but I have a weak spot for *one* of them," answered the other so impressively, that the other seemed to respect his feelings.

"I s'pose she tried to coax you to give up this business—just as my old mother coaxes me?"

"Of course."

"And you told her you would do so one of these days—that you run into it without thinking, and that you would soon get out, go back to St. Louis and start as a preacher."

"Hardly that."

"Then you will do like Jesse James's brother—hire out as a clerk in a shoe-store so you can fit shoes on the pretty feet of the ladies."

Harry laughed in a way which filled the listener with disgust, for it convinced him that he had played the arch hypocrite in his talk with Evelyn Clarendon.

"Helloa! who's that?" asked Arkansaw Amos at that moment, like one who starts at every suspicious sound.

Before he could say or do anything more, the well-known whistle was heard from the road, and the two outlaws on the porch knew that everything was right.

The new arrivals were two men, and their words showed that they belonged to the gang. They both were in a state of high excitement over something that had taken place that evening.

"Bill and Lige was coming down the road," said one, "when they run ag'in' an old fellow, and had the biggest kind of a fight with him."

"Where'd they bury him when the fight was over?" asked Arkansaw Amos with a snicker.

"Where did they bury him?" repeated one of the two; "it's *them* that are likely to be planted. Would you believe it, the bum got the drop on 'em and plugged both."

Arkansaw Amos ripped out an oath by way of introduction to the inquiry as to whither we are drifting which he put into the words:

"Everything seems to be going wrong; what's gettin' into the boys?"

"I think a mighty big lot of lead is getting into them," ventured Handsome Harry.

"What has become of Bill and Lige?"

"Lige has got such a dose that I don't believe he'll get over it, but Bill warn't hit so hard. They managed to git back to tha' hosses and will go back into the interior to grow up with the country."

"Who was the covey that dosed 'em?"

"He looked like an innocent old farmer, in spectacles and with a big carpet bag."

"Furies!" exclaimed Arkansaw Amos; "that chap is asleep inside there this very minute."

"He is! wal, he's the individual we're looking for."

"He's your innocent Uncle Peleg," snarled Arkansaw Amos, turning toward Handsome Harry; "you're a bright one to be scooped in that fashion."

"By the Jumping Jehosiphat!" exclaimed Harry, in reply; "it *does* look as if I was fooled, but if so, he would have fooled any one, even his own grandmother and all her able-bodied relations."

"Another of the flatters," said one of the late arrivals, "but it's lucky that we've got him corralled. There ain't any back way that he can get out, Harry!"

"Not much; he's sound asleep in there."

"Don't be too sure of that," added Arkansaw Amos, springing to his feet; "any way, he's *there*, and we'll fill him so full of lead that he will sink like the anchor of the Great Eastern."

And with that the leader threw open the door and burst into the room, followed by the rest of the infuriated outlaws, all eager to slay the Heart of Oak Zigzag, who was still stretched on the floor, feigning sleep.

CHAPTER XIX.

"HE'S MINE, BOYS; HANDS OFF!"

NEVER were the nerves of Zigzag the detective subjected to a more terrific test, than on that autumn night, when he lay on the floor of the outlaw's cabin, feigning sleep.

When the new arrivals on the outside made known their business, he saw the scrape in which he was caught. He felt emphatically that the best place for him to be was somewhere else.

There was no rear door to the single apartment, of which the lower part of the structure was composed, and the only avenue of egress was the single back window which was too small to permit the passage of his body.

Could he not run up the ladder and make a fight against the men who were bent on his life?

He decided to stay where he was, and so, when Arkansaw Amos burst into the room, with his desperadoes at his heels, Uncle Peleg seemed to be sleeping as peacefully as if in his own bed, away down in New Hampshire.

Arkansaw Amos leveled his weapon and said to his followers:

"He's mine, boys; hands off!"

"Hold on!" interrupted Handsome Harry, laying his hand on his arm; "that won't do, Arkansaw."

"I'd like to know why it won't; what have you got to say about it?"

The others looked inquiringly at their handsome comrade, as if at a loss to know why he interfered.

"I don't mind your shooting a fellow when he's sound asleep, though I'd be ashamed to do it myself."

"What then is the matter?"

"Why, don't you see that he must have some information that will be of use to us?"

"What of it?"

"Let's get it out of him before we shove him through the air-hole under the ice."

The suggestion was such a good one that Arkansaw Amos, as well as his companions, were glad that it was made.

"I'll wake him," added the leader, leveling his pistol at the head of Uncle Peleg and pulling the trigger.

The report sounded sharp and loud in the room, and awakened both Dinah Evelyn in the room above. It had the intended effect also, of awaking the sleepers, for the bullet grazed his ear and buried itself in the logs behind him. He started to a sitting position, and stared in a bewildered way around him.

"Stars and garters, Harry!" he exclaimed; "what's the matter?"

"You'll soon find out what's the matter," growled Arkansaw Amos, with a guffaw and oath.

Before firing the weapon, one of the men trimmed the flickering candle and another stirred the fire, and as a consequence, the room was illuminated brightly.

The four outlaws grouped themselves

around Uncle Peleg, who stared up at them and around the room in ludicrous amazement.

"Get up and take a seat," commanded the leader; "we want to have a talk with you."

There were just enough chairs in the room to accommodate all, and Uncle Peleg, apologizing for having off his coat, donned it and took a seat near the fire, doing so in a confused way that seemed perfectly natural; so much so indeed was it that only one person noticed that when he sat down in his chair, he was closer to the door than were any of the others.

That single individual who observed the significant fact was Fred Ripley, but from some cause or other, he made no reference to it.

"Gentlemen, I'm obligeed to you for the honor of this call and it looks as though you had come to tell me I've been nominated for some office, but I'll be darned if I wouldn't rather you'd waited till to-morrow, so I could have had my sleep out. Nowsumdever, since you're here I'm ready to listen," and Uncle Peleg yawned as though he was anxious to get to sleep again, while Handsome Harry took upon himself the part of interviewer, for the time being.

"Since you lay down to sleep, sir, we have received news of your fight with a couple of our friends down the road. You shot both and one of them so badly that he is about to die."

Nothing could exceed the expression of blank wondering amazement that spread over the moon-like countenance of Uncle Peleg. For one minute he stared in the face of Harry, then looked with the same inquiring expression at the others, and finally broke into laughter.

"Pshaw now! What are ye joking 'bout? Me shoot a man! Why it always broke my heart to stick a pig at home."

The acting of the old gentleman was perfect, but it could not mislead those around him.

"You done that well, old Hayseed," said Arkansaw Amos, "but we're too old birds to be catched with such chaff."

"The fact is," added one of the new arrivals, "we've got you this time."

"The Pinkertons, Thiel, and the other gangs have been sending their men down here for a couple of years," said the leader, "and all they had to do was to lasso Arkansaw Amos and his merry men."

"And I observe," added Handsome Harry, "that those who come down in this latitude on this errand like it so well that they never go back again."

"And never will," growled Arkansaw; "you played your part well, there ain't no use of denyin' that, but it won't work. You've got just five minutes to say your prayers."

Uncle Peleg had shown great skill, but he saw that it was impossible longer to blind the outlaws as to his true character. The fact was he had already secured the information for which he had come so far and hunted so hard, and all that he wanted to do now was to remove from that latitude and locate somewhere else, which is the same that may be said of almost any one placed in peril of his life.

The Heart of Oak Detective's wonderful nerve did not desert him. As stated, without attracting suspicion (except on the part of Handsome Harry), he had placed his chair closer to the door than any of the others. Indeed, the two arrivals were well over toward the rear window, Harry and Amos being at the other end of the table. Seated thus, the back of Uncle Peleg was toward the door through which he must escape if he ever escaped at all, and his face was turned to the rear window that had served him so well earlier in the evening.

While the exciting conversation was going on, the four outlaws noticed that Uncle Peleg, as he was called, kept glancing at the window as though something there interested him. Some of them suspected that he meditated an attempt at escape through it, forgetful of the obvious fact that it was too small to allow the passage of his body, which may have been the reason why the two stayed so near the window, so as to take the fugitive "on the fly."

The ominous words we have given were yet in the mouth of Arkansaw Amos, when every one in the room heard a suspicious

sound, which was plainly *outside* of the apartment, and appeared to come from a point near the window.

It is hard to describe the noise made, but it may be compared to that caused by a hand groping over the surface of wood on the search for something which eludes its grasp.

"I knowed it!" exclaimed Uncle Peleg, with a startled look; "I see'd him plain *that time!*"

CHAPTER XX.

A DARING AND SKILLFUL DEED.

It was an old trick of the detective—that of pretending to see some one behind the parties whose eyes he wished to turn away from him for a second or two.

It was so old indeed that it must have failed, but for the sound of a hand groping along the logs on the outside. His words, following directly upon the noise, which all heard in the stillness of the room, caused every one to look around.

It was so dark on that side of the house which was in shadow, that nothing could be seen, but each scoundrel heard a slight noise at the door through which they had entered but a few minutes before, and like a flash the heads turned in *that* direction.

The next instant a torrent of imprecations shot from the lips of the train-robbers, and all sprung to their feet.

That which they saw was the door which had been snatched open, closing with the suddenness of a steel-trap, so quickly indeed that it just missed catching the tail of Uncle Peleg's linen duster as he went out on the porch, as if fired from the mouth of a Parrott gun.

Arkansaw Amos, in his fury, let fly with two barrels of his revolver, the bullets splintering into but not passing through the thick, rough planking of which the door was constructed:

But the leap of the scamps was so quick that the table and several chairs were overturned, while the leader wrenched back the door with such suddenness that it looked as if the fugitive must be within arm's reach.

Not quite, but the start was fearfully slight. Slight as it was, however, it was enough for Zigzag, who had been one of the most active and skillful athletes at Harvard.

Just the faintest glimpse of the man was caught as he bounded off the porch and whisked around the corner of the cabin. The whole party dashed after him like so many bloodhounds, but when they plunged around the corner their man was invisible.

The sound as if of a rushing wind indicated the point where he had vanished and guns and revolvers were emptied in that direction. But there was not one of the infuriated outlaws who so much as suspected that a hair of the head of the daring detective had been harmed.

There was enough moonlight at the front of the cabin to reveal the four fierce-looking men, standing at the end of the porch with their smoking weapons in hand, glaring like wild beasts at the fringe of dark woods and grinding their teeth with rage.

The sound of the firearms roused Dinah and Evelyn up-stairs, and the latter was terribly alarmed for Uncle Peleg as she listened with a rapidly throbbing heart to learn what it meant.

Crouching at the head of the ladder, without showing herself, she was soon able to catch enough to tell her the truth.

They had learned, or at least become convinced that Uncle Peleg was a detective, but though a desperate attempt had been made to take his life, he had escaped the vengeance of the men, at least for the time.

When all doubt on that point was removed, the beauteous girl pressed her hand against her heart and murmured:

"Thank God!"

Dinah, the huge negro servant, was so accustomed to scenes of violence that she merely turned over on the blanket, where she was lying in the corner, grunted something unintelligible to her fair companion, and resumed her heavy slumber.

But Evelyn crouched at the head of the stairs for some minutes, listening to the excited talk below. Stripped of the profanity which garnished the conversation, the substance was about as follows:

"He's the sharpest one of them all," re-

marked Arkansaw Amos, when they had resumed their seats and their pipes.

"That is so, for he got into this cabin and took a nap and then got out again without a scratch. None of the others has ever got that far."

"No; they generally got took with sudden sickness afore they reached this p'int."

"Bat, by thunder!" added the knave, who had been sitting closest to the window; "there was more than one."

"Yes, there was two, for I reckon we all heard that one outside the window there."

"Yes, no mistake about that," added Arkansaw Amos, savagely puffing his briar-wood pipe, "for I sot the furthest off and I heard him."

Had any one noticed the countenance of Handsome Harry, a strange expression would have been observed. He sat a little further back from the fire than did the rest, placidly smoking a cigar, and without turning his head, he could view the countenances of the rest, by merely glancing from one face to the other.

At the utterance of the last words quoted by the leader of the outlaws, Handsome Harry replaced his half-smoked cigar between his lips and looked at Arkansaw Amos, and as he did so, a curious twinkle lit up the fine eyes of the young man for a single moment.

But he "wasn't saying a word."

He knew the meaning of that singular noise outside the window, which caused the face of every one of the gang to turn that way at the instant that it was necessary they should do so, in order to secure the safety of Uncle Peleg.

Knowing in his own mind the explanation of the slight disturbance, he could afford to smile with his eyes at the blunder of those around him, for it was not produced by what they supposed.

Suddenly Arkansaw Amos brought down his fist on the table with a resounding thump, while his glittering eyes flashed fire:

"By the great Cæsar!" he exclaimed, "do you remember, Harry, what we were talking about when we sot on the porch out doors?"

Harry looked quietly at him a moment, as though it was a matter of indifference; then he slowly nodded his head several times, as a man will do when his interest is languid.

"Wal, what was it?" demanded Arkansaw Amos, angry at the coolness of his handsome lieutenant.

"A number of things—such as the boys meeting to-morrow at Devil's Den, and the need of our keeping shady for some time to come, and so on—I don't know as I call it all to mind."

"Wal, sir, I'm convinced that that fellow inside heard every word we said."

Harry smiled, and with the cigar between his teeth, solemnly swayed his head from side to side, as though the matter did not admit of dispute. The leader became impatient.

"How do you know he didn't? You seem to know so much, explain that to me, will you, say?"

Harry appeared to think it best that he should show some energy in a matter in which all were so deeply interested. So he sat erect, smoked hard for a few seconds, snatched the cigar from between his teeth, and with something of the old flash in his fine eyes, said:

"In the first place, when he lay on the floor, I tried him in a way that he couldn't have stood, if he wasn't slumbering like the Seven Sleepers. I tell you there was no mistake *there*," added Harry impressively; "I wasn't taking any chances."

"But he might have waked afterwards," suggested Arkansaw Amos.

"But you proved that couldn't be."

"I proved it! How?" demanded the astonished leader.

CHAPTER XXI.

UNCLE PELEG HAD BEEN THERE.

"WHEN the other boys came up on the porch," said Handsome Harry, "they talked loud enough to awaken the fellow even if he had been up-stairs."

"Wal, what of *that*?"

"Do you suppose he would have lain still on the floor, when he knew that it was certain death to do so? And when you started through the door, meaning to riddle him

with bullets, would he have kept still? Not much; he would have met you with a pistol-shot, for a man that fights like that isn't fool enough to take such chances."

It may be said that these questions carried their own answers, for it was inconceivable to the outlaws that any sensible person should have acted in the manner described by Handsome Harry, and yet that is precisely what Uncle Peleg, otherwise Zigzag the detective, did.

Arkansaw Amos was convinced, as were his companions, with the exception, perhaps, of Harry, who kept his own counsel.

"Wal, there's *one* thing sart'in," said the leader, "we orter be at the Devil's Den this very minute, and it won't do to hang around here more than three or four weeks longer."

"When should we start?" asked Si Snork.

"We must do it to-night."

"Are the animals all right?" asked Harry.

"Yes," answered Jubilee Juggens; "they're in good trim, too, so that we can ride 'em till daylight, if it's necessary."

Still standing on the outside, Arkansaw Amos said in a lower voice to Handsome Harry, whom he trusted more than any one else:

"Do you know that I've an idee that that infernal Uncle Peleg, as you call him, will stumble onto some of our hoss-flesh?"

"That is hardly possible," said Harry, in a voice which showed that he felt by no means certain on the point.

"Thar ain't anything sart'in 'bout them coves 'cept that they're always up to some kind of mischief."

"Had we better make sure?"

"Yes—you and me will take a look at 'em, that is," added Arkansaw, dubiously, "if they're thar to take a look at. You can't start with us to-night?"

"No; I'll have to escort Miss Clarendon to the station to-morrow morning and see her on the train."

"You'll run a big risk."

"Why?"

"Some of the officers will be on the train."

"Don't we *always* run a risk?"

"Yes—but only what we *have* to run."

"There's no escaping this."

"Why can't the gal go to the station alone?"

Could the leader have seen the eyes of Harry he would have been startled by their fierce flash.

"No, sir; I don't leave her until I see her on board the train."

"All right—as you please; but I say, Harry."

"Well?"

"Don't let's have any more of this business."

"What business?"

"This mixing up women in the perfeshion."

Harry laughed.

"I don't think it can ever take place again; six hours ago I wouldn't have believed it could happen at all."

"If you want everything to go to everlasting smash, why git a female woman in it, and it's sure to do so."

"There can be no harm from her presence."

"How do you know but what she'll blab when she gets away from here?"

"Miss Clarendon is one of the few women who can keep a secret; besides," added Harry, significantly, "suppose she *does* blab, what harm can it do?"

"She may tell everything."

"What you call *everything* with her amounts to nothing at all; for she knows no more than Uncle Peleg. She may let it be known that she was entertained in this cabin, but what of *that*?"

"Haven't you told her any more?" asked the leader.

"Have you ever known me to tell any one a secret that I ought to keep?"

"No."

The phrase "that I ought to keep," was capable of a very liberal interpretation, but the leader of the train robbers gave it its literal meaning.

"Wal," said he, with a sigh, as though a load was lifted from his heart, "we'll take a look after the animals and then come back."

Arkansaw Amos explained to the two men whom they called Si Snork and Jubilee

Juggens that they would not be gone more than half an hour at the most, and these two worthies were directed to stay where they were, in order to watch the cabin.

Accordingly Arkansaw, as he was often called for short, and Harry walked along the faintly-marked path until they reached the highway which it will be remembered was not traveled to any great extent.

It was at this juncture that it occurred to Harry that the arrangement was a rather peculiar one.

If Arkansaw Amos and the other two intended to start as soon as they could for Devil's Den, while he was to stay until morning in order to act as the escort of Evelyn, why had not the others gone away from the cabin together?

Who could remain so appropriately as himself to guard the place in which his beloved was resting?

He reflected that Snork and Juggens were two of the most desperate wretches that belonged to the gang.

Had he been obliged to choose between them and a couple of Bengal tigers to act as the guardian of the fair and beauteous girl, he would not have selected the couple.

Harry was on the point of stopping and telling the leader that he would exchange places with the other two, when it occurred to him that having reached the highway and passed some distance, it was not worth while to do so.

He was quite convinced that the two did not know that Evelyn was in the attic with no one but the drowsy Dinah to guard her.

Then, too, even if they knew or suspected it, they would not dare insult her, aware of the retribution they would be sure to receive from Harry, and then he would hasten matters and return at the end of half an hour if not before.

So, unfortunately, he walked along the darkened highway, beside Arkansaw Amos, without giving expression to the terrible doubt that flashed through his mind.

"Here we turn," said the leader after they had gone about half the distance from the cabin to the railway station.

It was impossible to see the faintly marked path in the dense gloom, but Arkansaw was so familiar with it, that he could hardly go astray.

The path was so strait that Harry naturally dropped behind the other. They had to go not far, when they emerged into a natural opening of perhaps a half acre in extent.

In one corner, was a rough shed consisting of a roof of leaves and branches supported on a half dozen knotted limbs, whose ends were driven into the ground.

Beneath this rude structure the outlaws, when in that section of the country, often tied their horses, while they ate the hay that one of the neighboring farmers brought to the spot and which the owners strewed on the ground in front of the beasts.

Arkansaw Amos, when he caught sight of the stable, if such it may be called, walked faster and faster, as a man will do who is anxious to settle a question that troubles him.

He was several steps in advance of his companion, when he hurried beneath the roof to make a personal inspection of the property belonging to himself and others.

The next instant an appalling oath escaped him.

"Uncle Peleg has been here!"

Such was the fact.

CHAPTER XXII.

ON THE LADDER.

As has been stated, Si Snork and Jubilee Juggens were two of the most hardened of the gang. Like their leader, they had committed their early crimes in the State of Arkansaw, though for the last few years their haunts were in Texas. Their character may be summed up by saying that there was no meanness too despicable, no sin too revolting and no crime too dreadful for them to commit.

"Jube," said Snork to his companion, almost at the moment that Arkansaw Amos and Handsome Harry vanished in the gloom, "we must speak low now."

"I catch on," replied the other in the same guarded undertone, as he hitched closer to him on the front porch.

"You know what Tom told us."

Tom, it will be remembered, was the station-agent.

"Yes."

"The purtiest gal we ever set eyes on is here."

"Sart'in sure."

"I sort of thought Tom was lying at first, but he ain't."

"How do you know that?"

"I overheard something between Arkansaw and Harry."

"What was it?"

"Nothin' pertic'lar, 'cept he said something 'bout the lady up-stairs."

"That settles it; what's the racket?"

"She's resting that."

"But Dinah is with her."

"What of that? Ain't we solid with Dine?"

"Wal, let's go up-stairs and make a call on the young lady—just to pay our respects, you know."

The proposition suited the other exactly, with one important exception—there was too much personal risk involved.

Not from the young lady, though they knew the brave front she had shown when the railway train was held up, but from Handsome Harry, who was her escort.

If he should find on his return that either Snork or Juggens had offered any rudeness to Miss Clarendon, blood would be shed. At least, that was the opinion of Juggens, who knew that when the fine-looking young outlaw fell into a rage he was a cyclone.

"We can fix that," said Snork, significantly, "don't you see? We don't know there's any young lady in the house; we get tired and sleepy—we go up the ladder to retire to our virtuous couches—we are astonished to find some one there—we try to act like the gentlemen we are—eh, Jube?—the lady is frightened—we're sorry—but she imagines certain things—see?"

This was all well enough, but Juggens held the vengeance of Mr. Handsome Harry in too great respect to run the risk of colliding with it.

"I'm with you in heart," he said, "but I'll be shot, Si, if I'm going to take a hand in anything of the kind."

"Why not?"

"There's Handsome Harry—I tell you, Si, you can't fool your Aunt Eliza."

"Bah! are you afraid?"

"Yes, I am."

"Of the gal?"

"You know well enough—it's Harry."

"All right—I'll make the call myself."

"Better give it up, Si; you'll be sorry, sure as you live."

With a contemptuous sniff the other rose to his feet and followed by his companion entered the cabin.

The fire was beginning to smolder, and another "thief" was in the wick but the interior was illuminated sufficiently for them to see everything in the room. The miscreants stepped softly like a couple of midnight burglars, for they were as treacherous by nature as rattlesnakes. At the table, Jubilee Juggens softly sat down in one of the primitive chairs.

Si Snork, who was a step in advance turned, and, without speaking, gave him an inquiring look.

Jube shook his head and said in a guarded voice:

"Not for Jo."

At the same time, he shook his head from side to side in a way that left no doubt of his meaning. Si Snork was not scared, but he felt the need of caution.

A young lady who was not afraid to rise in her seat and open fire on the gang of train-robbers was not likely to sit still and allow such a scoundrel as Si Snork to walk into her sleeping apartment.

It might be set down as certain that the weapon which had done her such good service in the former instance was still at her command, but, as will be understood, the outlaw's reliance was on the supposition that the fair guest was asleep.

Had he known she was awake, it is hardly to be supposed that he would have dared to intrude upon her, but he meant in case she was awake, to make some apology and withdraw in time to escape the pistol-bullet.

As for Dinah, Snork felt no misgiving on her account; she was as bad as bad could be

and had never shown any disposition to interfere with the amusement of the white "gentman."

Picking up the candle from the table, Snork moved softly to the foot of the ladder, where he stopped and listened.

The stillness was oppressive. Jubilee Juggens sat smoking his pipe and watching his movements with a curious expression on his ugly face, and the fire burned without noise. The voice of the wind outside was so faint and low that the strained ear could hardly catch the first sound. It was a time, it seemed, when conscience would make its voice heard. But conscience, in the breasts of these two wretches, had long since been dumb.

"Sh! didn't Snork hear a faint footfall above his head, as though some one was moving stealthily about?"

He had placed his own foot on the ladder and he stood with the other resting on the floor.

No; he could hear nothing. It must have been a sudden gust of wind that died out as soon as it rose. He looked inquiringly at Jubilee Juggens, who shook his head again to intimate that he had heard nothing suspicious, and then with candle in hand, Snork steadily climbed the steps of the ladder.

Eyes and ears were open, but he saw and heard nothing until near the top of the ladder.

It was at that juncture that Mr. Silas Snork became convinced that he had entered the region of storms, hurricanes and cyclones and the strangest part of all was that Miss Evelyn Clarendon had nothing in the world to do with it.

CHAPTER XXIII.

A CAPITAL CRIME.

"WAL, I'll be consarned," chuckled Zigzag, still preserving his favorite character of Uncle Peleg from New Hampshire; "that was a mighty clus call."

He had just bounded off the porch and made a terrific run through the undergrowth to the shelter of the wood, where, feeling he was safe, he stopped and looked back at the cabin, dimly outlined in the faint moonlight.

"Pop away!" he muttered, as he saw the flashes of the pistols and rifles and heard the bullets patter among the branches around him; "if you enjoy it I don't know that I've any objection."

Resting a few minutes, and making sure that he was not followed, he took his bearings with the skill of a frontier scout.

It was no trouble to locate the road which he entered a few minutes later, and it need not be said that the detective was thinking hard.

He was in good spirits, for he felt that he had made a ten strike, and he certainly had effected his own escape in a wonderful manner, besides which he had acquired highly important information about Arkansaw Amos and his gang.

"The most mysterious character I ever met is Fred Ripley, known among these scoundrels as Handsome Harry," said the detective, picking his way along with eyes and ears open.

"He seems to be shrewd and cautious, and yet he sat down on the porch and gave away secrets in my hearing that the State of Texas would pay fifty thousand dollars to get."

"Confound it, where is it that he and I have met? It beats all creation that I can't locate him—Helloa!"

The first disappointment of the evening now came to the detective. With that quick decision which was a necessity of his profession, Zigzag decided to board the train at the station and make his way to Dallas, or telegraphing ahead to that point, to meet a number of parties and quickly arrange the campaign against Arkansaw Amos and his gang. But while picking his way along the darkened highway, he caught the sound of a locomotive whistle. Stopping short he could hear the rumble and roar of the ten o'clock train.

"Of course," growled the officer; "it is on time to a minute to-night, or more than likely it is just twenty-four hours late; I'll bet that it is the first time in two years and a half, and that it'll never do so again. If it

was only five or ten minutes late to-night, I would have been at the station."

But there was no help for it, and Zigzag had learned the great lesson of life to take philosophically everything that came. The failure to reach the station in time to catch the south-bound Express, rendered necessary a change in his plans. No other train would be due along until the forenoon of the next day, and he concluded that as a matter of course it would be several hours late.

"It won't do for me to show myself about the station," was his prudent conclusion, "for the boys will be on the watch, so I think I'll strike the track a mile or two below, and then hoof it to the next point."

It was necessary that he should recover his carpet-bag which, as will be remembered, he had concealed, when he found an encounter inevitable with the two outlaws that were following him.

The moon was now higher in the heavens, and gave more help than when he came that way before. He did not expect to make hunt for his property before the morrow, when he would have the sun to help him; but by the aid of several wax matches, he found the spot, and a minute or two later, he had the big carpet-bag in the grip of his strong right hand.

"Now I'm equipped for an all-night tramp—"

The soft whinny of a horse fell on his ear, and his quick sense of hearing enabled him to tell the precise point whence it came.

"I must investigate."

Holding the waxen match over his head, he observed the narrow path leading into the wood on the other side of the road, noticing too, that most of the footprints were made by horses.

A short walk into the forest (as we have explained elsewhere), took him to the rude stable erected on the half-acre of open space, and a little investigation disclosed five horses, as fine-blooded and fleet-footed as could have been found on the plains of Texas.

The Heart of Oak Detective was a lover of horse-flesh, and when, with the aid of the artificial light, which startled the animals, he was able to run his eyes over them, it may be said that his mouth watered.

"Well, I'll be blessed," he said with a sigh of enjoyment, lighting another match and holding it over his head, as he slowly moved about and among the animals; "if that ain't the finest sight that I've looked on in many a day."

He stood several minutes literally feasting his eyes, and then throwing down the stump of the match, he added:

"There's only one capital crime in Texas, which is horse-stealing, and that's the precise crime which I propose to commit within the next three minutes."

Like most persons engaged in that profession, the detective had no compunctions of conscience. The simple matter with him was whether he could make a success of it.

"There's no doubt that they have stolen the animals in the first place from parties who likely enough stole them from others; that, however, don't make any difference."

The detective had located each beast so well by the aid of the artificial light, that he needed no help to bring them out of the stable.

He noticed that they were all saddled and bridled, as if their owners expected soon to be on the road, and one of them had on the side-saddle which had been used by Miss Clarendon. This seemed to confirm what Arkansaw Amos had said about his intention of starting for Devil's Den twenty miles away just as soon as the start could be made. It need not be stated that in making his selection of animals, Zigzag took the best couple of the group.

And in doing so, he made off with the favorite animals of Arkansaw Amos and Handsome Harry, the latter being the one with the lady's saddle.

Was it strange that when those two men discovered the little trick that had been played on them, they were right down angry?

Reaching the open space, Uncle Peleg, as we will call him just now, sprung into the saddle, balanced his carpet-bag in front of him, holding the reins with one hand while he led the second horse with the other. Then he started along the narrow path over which Arkansaw Amos and Handsome Harry came

within the following half-hour. Had they come a little earlier wouldn't there have been lively times in that path?

It looked as if the detective was taking reckless chances that evening, but he was not.

Out on the highway once more, he turned the horses' heads toward the railway station. He thought it best to keep them on a walk, for, If it should become suddenly necessary to leap to the ground and take to the woods, he could do it better if the animals were traveling on a slow gait.

The chances seemed to be in favor of meeting some of his enemies who were sure to be in a bloodthirsty mood, but for the time fortune favored him.

He halted at the same spot where Handsome Harry had dismounted earlier in the evening and sprung off his animal, leaving the two standing untied in by the side of the road.

Reaching the platform of the station, he found that the agent was in the act of closing up preparatory to retiring to sleep in the rear of the building.

"Hold on," called out Uncle Peleg, "I want to send a dispatch."

"It's too late," was the sullen reply.

"I reckon not," added the other; "if this message don't go through inside of five minutes, you'll never be called upon to send another!"

CHAPTER XXIV.

ON THE ROAD AGAIN.

It would be putting it mildly to say that Tom, the telegraph operator, was astonished, for he was not accustomed to being addressed in that fashion.

At first, he did not recognize the individual who used such vigorous language in making known his wishes.

"Oh, it's you, eh?" he said, looking up in the face of Uncle Peleg.

"I think you and I have met before."

"Well, let's have your message," said the other sulkily, but afraid to show any impertinence to one who had such a temper, backed up by such unmistakable muscular strength.

Uncle Peleg hastily wrote a few words on one of the telegraph blanks, and passed it through the narrow window. When Tom looked it over, he saw that it was addressed as before, but instead of letters, it was composed of a jumble of figures.

"What does this mean?" he asked; "there's no sense to that stuff."

"Of course not to *you*, but all you have to do is to send what is handed to you. Come, be lively!"

The young man took the slip, first receiving the pay he demanded, and then sat down to his clicking instrument; but instead of calling the operator at Dallas, he addressed the messenger at Texarkana.

"Jim," he telegraphed, "there's a chap here that I know is one of them—"

"Stop!" commanded Uncle Peleg, showing the muzzle of his revolver through the open space. "I'm as good a telegraphist as you. I gave you a message to Dallas, not to Jim in Texarkana. Send what I handed you or I'll blow a hole through your upper story, and mighty quick, too."

The operator shivered from head to foot, convinced that he was dealing with a man who would stand no trifling. Without a word of protest or explanation, and with all the promptness at his command, he sent the dispatch precisely as written.

A furtive glance over his shoulder now and then showed the broad face of Uncle Peleg at the window with his pistol in hand.

"That's right," commented the sender; "it's mighty lucky for you that you didn't make any mistake."

"Do you expect a reply?" asked Tom, timidly.

"No, I don't propose to wait about here."

And with this farewell, he walked out of the little building upon the low platform.

The message, it may be said, which was so unintelligible to the operator was directed to a brother detective in Dallas, who was waiting in the office and received it within five minutes after it reached its destination.

It directed him to come north at once to Rialto, which was a railway station about ten miles north of the one from which it was

sent. The only reply that could have been forwarded to Zigzag would have named the train on which he and his men would start from Dallas.

That was not necessary, for Zigzag had made himself thoroughly acquainted with the stations and trains, and he was aware that one would leave Dallas for the north at eleven o'clock that night, that is provided it was on time, which is not the rule with the railway lines in the Southwest.

This train would be due at Rialto about nine o'clock the next morning.

There ought to be a strong force of detectives on it, and, if nothing unexpected took place, it may be said that the campaign against Arkansaw Amos would be fairly opened on the morrow.

But there's many a slip 'twixt the cup and lip.

Rialto lying the distance named to the northward was in the general direction of Devil's Den where the outlaws made their headquarters. The distance was twenty miles; therefore, between the present location of Zigzag and the men he was after, it would be shortened by about one-half if he could reach Rialto.

His intention was to travel that far that night, so as to be in the neighborhood by daylight.

He would take the route named by Handsome Harry, which ran quite near the railway track, and since he was well mounted, it will be seen that the ride was not a trying one.

Having done all that he wished at the station, he walked along the platform to where he had left the two horses standing, and found they had not been disturbed.

They showed some timidity as though they knew he was a stranger, but Zigzag was an excellent horseman and he soon quieted them.

Fastening his carpet-bag to the side-saddle of the second animal, he mounted the other and faced along the road which he followed earlier in the evening on foot.

Even Zigzag felt that he was taking a fearful risk, for it was necessary for him to ride directly in front of the cabin from which he had dashed in such haste for his life.

Could he expect to escape the desperate men from whom he had had such a narrow deliverance?

Hardly, but the detective was warranted in feeling considerable self-confidence. Favored by the woods and darkness, he was quite sure that he could take care of himself, though in all probability he would be compelled to part company with the two horses, but that was not a serious matter, for they were of no particular use to him, and he could give them up without a pang.

"So, with no hesitation, but with considerable misgiving, Zigzag, still in the guise of Uncle Peleg, rode up the lonely highway.

The careful study which he had given to the geography of the section resulted in a knowledge which in some respects surpassed that of the gang itself. At the very point where he had had his desperate encounter with two of them, he became aware that some one else was present or rather near him.

The horse which he was riding pricked his ears, threw up his head and stopped. His rider instantly pulled him aside among the trees, the other following close after him, when they halted.

Uncle Peleg meant in case of detection to slip out of the saddle and take to the denser gloom of the forest, and in order to be ready he dismounted, unfastened his carpet-bag and stood at the head of his own animal.

Standing thus, he heard two men walk by, both talking and one indulging in shocking profanity.

Uncle Peleg chuckled when he recognized the voice as that of Arkansaw Amos, who was cursing his bad luck to Handsome Harry, who seemed to be in an equally savage mood.

Little did the two imagine that the valuable animals which they had lost were standing within ten feet of them. A neigh or a whinny would have betrayed their presence and resulted in their recovery. But the animals had been well trained for such emergencies and they betrayed themselves by no sign.

Uncle Peleg waited until he believed they

were out of his way in front, and then resumed his advance, little dreaming of the surprise that was awaiting him.

CHAPTER XXV. GONE.

WE repeat that Mr. Si Snork became suddenly convinced that he had entered the region of storms, hurricanes and cyclones.

He walked as steathily as a cat up the rounds of the ladder leading to the upper story, candle in hand, and reaching an elevation sufficient to allow his head to be thrust through the opening, he slowly raised the candle above him and peered around in the dimly-illuminated gloom.

It was at that instant that he entered the region of storms, hurricanes and cyclones.

"Ar'n't you 'shamed ob yerself, you big onmannerly trash? What do you t'ink ob yerself obtrudin' onto de privacy ob a respectable colored lady? I'll teach yer!"

It was Dinah, who, having been aroused at last by the sounds of the firing outside the house, had become fully awake. Naturally stupid, it was some time before she could gather from the conversation she overheard what had taken place, but finally she learned from what Jubilee Juggens and Si Snork said, that the latter had concluded to call on the "lady up-stairs."

Dinah had forgotten entirely the arrival of the beautiful Miss Clarendon the night before, or, if she recalled it, the memory was like a misty dream in which for the time there was no reality, and so when they talked about calling on the lady resting above, she was sure she was the one meant.

Accordingly, she prepared to give her callers a warm reception, and succeeded perfectly.

Jubilee Juggens was looking at his partner as he went up the rounds of the ladder so gingerly until only that part of his body below his shoulders was visible. The next instant Si came down in a heap and the candle in his hand flew half-way across the room, the words of Dinah which accompanied the *coup d'état* leaving no doubt of the explanation of the matter.

Jubilee Juggens threw back his head and roared; it was the most amusing sight on which he had ever looked. Snork raised his head and partly climbing to his feet, stared around in a dazed way as though he did not quite understand it all.

It was not long, however, before it became clear to him.

"Great Caesar!" he growled with an additional oath or two, as he rubbed his head and bruised portions, "I forgot all about that hippopotamus."

"But she didn't forget about you!"

And once more Jube threw back his head, and laughed until he was ready to fall to the floor, while Si glared at him like a wildcat.

"Some folks find it very easy to laugh," he snarled; "s'pose that had been *you*."

"Then *you'd* have had the laugh on *me*, that's all!"

And still again Jubilee Juggens gave way to his mirth.

Meanwhile the vigorous efforts which Dinah had put forth to protect herself from insult had the effect of sharpening her own wits. Having sent Snork flying down the ladder, she braced herself at the top for a renewal of the attempt, but while standing thus, grim, silent and defiant, the incidents of the evening, before she went to sleep, began to come back to her.

"Wal, I 'clar!" she exclaimed at last, "but dar *was* another lady up yar beside me and I done forgot all about her."

All was darkness and she had no match with which to light the candle with which she had conducted Miss Clarendon to her quarters for the night.

So she came slowly down the ladder with her elephantine tread, which seemed heavy enough to bring everything to the floor with a crash.

Standing at the bottom with her arms akimbo, she looked at Si Snork with a grin, and, shaking her head from side to side, said:

"What do you t'inks ob yerself, Si Snork?"

By this time, the outlaw had backed into a chair and relit his pipe. He saw the serious consequences that threatened him, in case Handsome Harry should learn of his attempt,

and he was aware that it would not do to make an enemy of Dinah.

The latter it may be said, held the key of the situation.

"I made a failure of it that time, Dine, and I admire the style in which you managed the bus'ness; will you promise me one thing?"

As he asked the question, he slipped a beautiful gold ring in her hand. It was a part of the proceeds of holding up the train the previous afternoon. Nothing delights the African race more than glittering jewelry and gewgaws.

"Golly, Mr. Snork, I'll promise *anyting* for *dat*," she said, her big eyes taking on an additional sparkle; "what am it?"

"Don't tell anything about this to *any* person."

"I won't do dat ob course," she hastened to say, for she had been the cook and servant of the gang long enough to know the need of keeping a silent tongue in her head.

No such request was needed of Jubilee Juggens, for he knew how it was himself.

"So you didn't come up-stairs to see *me*?" remarked Dinah, with one of her enormous grins, which set both her hearers laughing.

"Great heavens!" replied Si, if you thought that, I don't wonder that you tried to knock out my brains with your big foot."

"I t'ought mebbe you wanted me to come down and cook some supper. If dat was so de proper t'ing war to call me; so when I found you acterly had the imperence to come up de ladder, I jest b'iled."

"How is she?" asked Si Snork in the low eager tones of one whose interest was at the highest point.

"I guess she am sleepin' soundly; haven't seen nuffin' ob her since we went up-sta'rs. I'll see whedder she am awoke or not."

So saying, Dinah lit the candle which she had brought down the ladder with her, and began ascending the ladder again in her ponderous fashion.

Si Snork half-rose from his chair with the intention of following her, but Jube hastily said:

"Stop!"

"What's the matter with you?" asked Si, looking impatiently around at him.

"If you know what's best for you, Si Snork, you'll set still right where you are."

"What do you mean?"

"You know well enough."

"No—I don't."

"Arkansaw and Harry will soon be back; it won't be healthy for you to be catched up-stairs."

The outlaw seemed to feel the force of the argument, and sat down again, just as Dinah's big feet swung out of sight above.

She was heard moving around in her deliberate way, and the scamps patiently waited for her to descend. All at once, she began moving rapidly, like one who has made some striking discovery. Then the ladder squeaked, and down she came with greater speed than she had ever shown before.

"What's the matter?" asked the outlaws in one breath.

"What do you t'ink?" she asked in her scared way; "dat young lady dat am up-stairs ain't dar! She am done gone away!"

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHITHER?

Si SNORK and Jubilee Juggens stared at the negress as if they thought she was crazy.

"What are you talking about?" finally asked Snork.

"I jes' tole yer de Gospel troof—dat's what I did."

"It can't be."

"Come and see fur yerself," she said, leading the way to the foot of the ladder.

The two men followed, and a minute later all three stood on the floor above.

That part of the house was not divided into rooms, it occupying the entire upper floor. Of course there was very little in the way of furniture, though there were a few trinkets here and there, which had been brought back from the numerous pilfering expeditions on which the men had been engaged.

Blankets were scattered about for the men

to sleep upon whenever they chose to stay in the cabin.

"Dar's whar I laid down," said Dinah, indicating one corner, "arter I had seen the putty creatur' kneel down and say her prayers ober dar."

It would have been idle for either of the men to suggest that Dinah in making her search had overlooked the missing lady, for that was impossible.

Standing near the top of the ladder, with the candle held aloft, so as to illuminate the interior, there was no possible hiding-place for a person. Even a cat could not have escaped observation.

"She isn't here—that's as sure as you live!" said Jube, shutting his lips tight and shaking his head suggestively.

"Where can she be?"

By way of reply, Jube pointed to the open window which curiously enough neither of the others had noticed.

Stepping toward it, candle in hand, Dinah and the two made an examination, though really it was unnecessary.

The window was small, like the one below stairs, but it was large enough to allow such a *petite* young lady as Evelyn Clarendon to pass through.

That she had done so, there could be no possible doubt, since she was absent, and that was the only way by which she could have fled. The cabin was not a lofty structure, and the window opened out over the roof of the porch. To step from the former to the latter was an easy thing for a child to do, while a leap from the roof to the ground, although rather more than an ordinary jump, was such as scarcely any person would have hesitated to take.

"Well," said Snork, "there's nothing for us to do, except to go down-stairs and wait for Arkansaw and Harry."

"I'm thinking," added Jube, as they descended, "that there'll be a row when they come."

"Why?"

"Harry will know that something unusual must have taken place to scare her away."

"That can be explained."

"There they come now!"

Steps were heard upon the porch, and the next moment the door was flung open and Arkansaw Amos and Handsome Harry entered, the faces of the two, especially of the leader, showing that they were in a furious mood over something.

The reader has learned what it was; they had found out that the monumental fraud, Uncle Peleg, had stolen the two best horses of the gang—one belonging to Arkansaw and the other to Harry.

No man could have learned of such a loss without a pang, and especially in the Southwest the noble animal is rated at the highest possible value.

Dropping into the nearest chair, Arkansaw savagely lit his pipe and made known the astounding news.

"Snork and Juggens, as a matter of course, were astonished, but their grief was considerably assuaged when they learned that neither of the missing animals belonged to them.

"Ain't it orful?" said Dinah, listening to the full story, "it am almos' as bad as de lady runnin' away."

"WHAT!" thundered Handsome Harry, leaping to his feet and advancing toward her; "what did you say?"

"Nuffin' tickler, 'cept dat young lady dat you brung hyar hab done gone away."

"Explain what you mean! How came she to go? Why did you allow her to leave?"

"Golly! she didn't *ax* me—she went all alone by herself widout anybody bein' wid her."

Snatching the candle from the table, Harry bounded up the ladder like a frantic person. Indeed, it may be said that he was frantic, for the flight of his beloved meant a great deal more than any one would have supposed.

The truth was, that on his way back from the discovery of the loss of the animals, he had done some intense thinking. He had come to the determination to tell her the secret which trembled on his lips that evening.

True, he had given his pledge not to make known the mystery until a certain result

was accomplished, but he felt that the circumstances were such that he was absolved from his promise.

"I will tell her *all*," he said to himself, "and then she will feel more charity for me. How can I blame her for judging me so harshly? Who would not do so? But when she knows *all*, she will change her mind. Then she will see the terrible injustice she has done me. I have but to utter four words, and the explosion comes. They were framed and trembling on my lips, when she crushed them in their very utterance by what she said. But, they *shall be said*, and this very night. I will have Dinah bring her down-stairs, and I will whisper them in her ear. Then all shall be radiant and right."

Such was the conclusion reached by the lover a few minutes before.

Now, when he arrived at his cabin, his heart a-flutter with hope he found she had left.

"But where has she gone?" was his agonized cry, as he stood alone in the darkness of the upper room, looking through the open window into the moonlight and gloom outside.

"I know why she fled," he added, in the very bitterness of his sorrow, "she fled not from the rest but from *me*. She believed I had deceived her. She has lost what respect and love lingered in her heart. She has wrestled long in spirit and then come to the belief that I was one of the worst of men. Like a true, noble woman, she has felt that self-preservation demanded that she should leave without delay. Fool that I was! Why did I not prevent this by speaking the words that were on my tongue? *Now it is too late!* No, it shall not be too late!" he exclaimed, fiercely; "she cannot have gone far! I will follow! I will explain! I will flee from this accursed life with her! She is worth more than all the world to me! She shall be *mine! mine! mine!*"

Ay, indeed, where was Miss Evelyn Clarendon?

CHAPTER XXVII.

THE FLIGHT.

SOONER than Evelyn Clarendon could have dreamed possible did she come to believe in the fearful truth of the warning given her by Zigzag, the detective.

Having committed herself to the care of heaven, as had been her invariable custom from infancy when lying down at night, she prepared to pass the dismal hours as best she could.

She hoped that, securely guarded by her lover below, and with the powerful negress almost at her elbow, she would be able to slumber in peace and quietness until morning, but she could not.

The exciting incidents of the afternoon and evening were enough to keep her thoughts busy, but the distrust, which she scarcely felt when she bade Fred Ripley good-night, deepened and intensified until she knew that no slumber could come to her eyes that night.

The most torturing belief that can come to a human being is the deliberate conviction that the one who has been implicitly trusted is unworthy of such faith.

She tried hard to credit the declaration of Fred that there was a reason, or rather a justification for his staying yet awhile longer with the outlaws, but in vain; she could not.

"There can be *no* justification," she said, to herself; "and for me to try to believe so is to warrant his doubt of my discretion."

Close upon this settled belief came what may be called the corollary of the proposition. If Fred was such a man, then it was not safe for her to stay another hour in the cabin. He did not intend that she should be allowed to go back to the railway station in the morning.

But how could she escape?

There was but one human being on whom she could depend; that was Uncle Peleg, the detective, and he was helpless.

Indeed, as the reader has learned, he was soon environed by a personal peril, from which not one man in a thousand would have been able to extricate himself.

The thanks which she uttered, when she knew he had effected his escape, could not have been more genuine.

The crisis of terror came when she learned that Fred and the leader of the gang had gone off, leaving the two desperadoes, Jo Snork and Jubilee Juggens in charge.

She heard every word of the talk between them from the moment when, seated on the porch outside, Snork declared that he was going up the ladder to call on her.

She had the tiny pistol with which to defend herself, and it need not be said that she would have done so to the death. But since her failure to kill the miscreant in the railway car, Evelyn had lost a good deal of the faith she formerly felt in the weapon.

It was likely to fail her at the critical moment, so she resolved on flight.

She had noticed the open window which had been left open for purposes of ventilation, on this cool autumn evening, and without the least hesitation, she carefully forced herself through the straight opening, and stepped as lightly as a bird on the roof of the porch.

At that moment she heard Dinah stir. Evidently from some cause the negress had awoken. Evelyn believed she was thoroughly wicked, and she, therefore, did not entertain the thought of trusting her.

No doubt she was heart and soul with the outlaws, and would betray the lady to her masters. The young lady, therefore, crouched down outside the window, fearful that she had been discovered; but fortunately she was mistaken.

Even if detected, she resolved to leap from the roof and take refuge in the woods, for the lonely cabin which she had entered in company with her lover, had become an object of inexpressible horror to her. Having lost all faith in *him*, she could only pray that she might get as far away as possible.

The height was not great from the roof, and with hardly a moment's hesitation, she dropped lightly to the ground, where, finding herself at last fairly outside of the cabin, she ran swiftly across the partially cleared space, scarcely taking breath until she entered the wood, when she halted, panting and with a rapidly-beating heart. It would not do to act blindly; never was her clear judgment more needed than at that moment. It will be remembered that the moonlight fell upon the front of the cabin, so that she had her bearings when in flight for the forest.

She had not forgotten that a train was due at the station at ten o'clock, and she hoped to catch it. There was not enough moonlight for her to see the face of her châtelaine, but she was confident the train had not yet passed.

No more dismal, forbidding, and indeed terrible walk can be imagined than that which confronted Evelyn Clarendon. It was necessary to go alone and unattended through a half-mile of forest at night.

Though there were no wild animals to add terrors to the situation, she did not feel any relief on that account, for the enemies which she dreaded were those of her own race.

They were the tigers of the jungle, and she would have preferred to meet a raging cat-o'-mountain rather than to encounter Fred Ripley, the man whom she had loved and trusted above all others, for she knew he would not permit her to go away.

The struggle between them could only be settled by the revolver, whose handle she continually grasped, but much as she loathed him, she prayed Heaven that that trial might be spared her.

Standing in the fringe of the wood, very near the spot where Uncle Peleg had stopped earlier in the evening, Evelyn took her bearings, finding little difficulty in locating herself.

She would have preferred to keep in the forest rather than to walk along the highway, but, under the circumstances, that was impossible. And so it came to pass that almost at the same moment three parties were passing over the road, some of whom were eager to meet the others, while some dreaded such meeting as they did their own death.

Sure enough, the young lady had not gone far, when the murmur of voices warned her of danger. She stepped among the trees and listened.

The gloom was too deep for her to recognize any one, but her heart almost stopped beating when she heard his voice—Fred

Ripley's, as he made reply to Arkansaw Amos.

"He did fool us when he played Uncle Peleg, but we'll even up matters with him yet."

"Harry, why don't you persuade that gal of yours to settle down in this part of the world and stay with us?"

Instead of resenting this insult with a blow, her own Fred indulged in a light laugh, as though the joke was a good one. Evelyn bit her lips, her bosom heaved, and with a gasping sigh she thought.

"He is the basest of them all; I will die before I ever cross the threshold of that cabin again."

Hardly waiting until they were beyond hearing, the maiden stepped back into the highway, and walked more rapidly than ever in the direction of the railway station.

But in a very few minutes she found that other parties were in the road in front.

CHAPTER XXVIII.

A HAPPY MEETING.

THIS time it was the figure of a horseman that dimly came into her field of vision.

The instant Evelyn identified the object she stepped aside with the intention of again concealing herself among the trees until the danger passed, but quick as she was, she was a second too late. She was seen and recognized by the rider, who called out:

"Wal, I'll be consarned if this don't beat all natur'!"

Miss Clarendon clasped her hands in an ecstasy of delight and gratitude and ran forward.

"Why, Uncle Peleg, where did you come from?"

"I reckon from purty near the same latitude that *you* did."

"Where did you get that horse?—and you have one following after—where did you obtain them?"

"I'm blessed if I can say for sart'in."

"And the other has a side-saddle—why it must be the very animal that I rode from the railway station."

"There can't be no doubt of that."

"That is the strangest thing I ever knew," said Evelyn, half to herself, for there was a singularity about the whole business that would have struck any one.

Even the detective felt it as he dismounted with the intention of helping the lady to a seat.

"I've always believed in special Provinces," said he, "and this is only one of the many that bless us every day. When I bade good-bye to the cabin in a somewhat of a hurry—did you know it?"

"I heard everything said and was sure there was no hope for you."

"It was a close call and I suppose that was the reason you left by way of the window and porch," remarked the detective, as he was about to resume his story, for he readily read the secret of the young lady's flight.

"As I was about to say, when I took the road to the station, I had no more idea of this than I had of flying. I learned where the horses were by accident and concluded to take a couple merely to annoy Arkansaw Amos and his friends. There you are!" he added, as he helped her to a seat and she took the reins in hand.

"But how came you to bring this one with a lady's saddle?"

"I took my own because he was the best horse there; yours I took because it was the next best one; the saddles added to their value."

"You didn't expect to meet *me*?"

"No more than you expected to meet *me*; but, Miss Clarendon I need not remind you that the minutes are precious."

"I know it," she answered glancing furtively over her shoulder, "but it is only a short distance to the railway station and I hear nothing of the train."

"It passed some time ago, and there is no other due before to-morrow."

"What shall we do?" asked Evelyn, bitterly disappointed.

The detective quickly explained.

"It won't do to go to the station where you got off, for they will be watching there. There is but the one course to take—gallop northward to the next stopping-place."

"Do you know how far it is?"

"About ten miles."

"What is its name?"

"It is known as Rialto."

"How is it you know so much about the country, Uncle Peleg, when you have never been here before?"

"If anybody ever tells you that I hain't been in this part of Texas afore, you jest set him down as a consarned liar," replied her companion dropping back into the character of the New-Englander; "do you s'pose, too, that when I made up my mind to leave New Hampshire and move to Texas that I didn't l'arn all I could about the pesky country? Wal, I reckon."

This jocose mood quickly vanished in the face of the danger before them. The detective explained that his plan was to ride to Rialto, in the neighborhood of which they would remain in hiding, until able to board the next train going south. Evelyn had no objection to offer, until she found that to do as the detective wished, would lead them in front of the cabin from which they had fled in such haste. At first she would not consent to go any nearer, asking that if they could hide in the vicinity of the Rialto, why could they not do the same near the station which they had just left?

The detective reminded her that they were sure to be hunted for in one place and not in another, and furthermore, the agent Tom was friendly to the gang and would be certain to help them.

The young lady consented, but with a heart filled with misgiving, though the coolness and courage of her companion did much to reassure her as they drew near the cabin.

"The road is broad enough for us to ride side by side," he said, in a guarded voice, as they drew near the building.

"Why not go faster?" she asked, beginning to feel nervous.

"It is better to keep our animals on a walk unless they discover us."

"What then?"

"We'll find out what stuff they are made of; keep cool."

A light twinkled from the lower window, as they drew near the lonely cabin. Not only that, but another was seen moving about the upper floor.

"They're looking for you," whispered Zigzag.

"I am afraid that that is not the only place where they will look," replied Evelyn, feeling that they were running a fearful risk.

If Arkansaw Amos or any of his men were in front of the cabin they would be sure to detect the horses.

The distance was too great for them to be seen, even with the aid of the faint moonlight, but in the tomb-like stillness, the faint sound of the hoofs would be certain to be noticed.

While the outlaws were without means of pursuit, they could soon secure their own animals, or they would be likely to fire a volley from the cabin which would be effective.

Zigzag was hopeful that the candlelight above stairs was a good sign, for, as he viewed it, it indicated that for a moment or two the interest of the party was centered there.

It seemed to Evelyn that her heart stopped beating when she glanced sideways and saw they were exactly opposite the structure which was but a short distance away.

She was afraid that one of the horses would neigh and thus bring disaster, but neither did so.

Finally, when the two had to turn their heads half-way round to look at the star-like twinkle of light, she began to breathe freely.

But her dread was so great that it was several minutes before she dared to speak. It seemed every minute as if she would hear the thunder of horses' feet behind them.

"We are safe," said the detective in a voice that sounded dangerously loud to his fair companion.

"I hope so."

"I know it; that is for the present."

"Uncle Peleg," said she a minute later, "tell me what you think of the young man they call Handsome Harry."

"I think there isn't a bigger sneak, hypocrite and consarned scoundrel unhung!"

She silently reached her hand across the small intervening space and grasped his

It was a token that her eyes had been opened, and her sentiments were in full accord with those of the New Englander.

Clearly the reputation of Handsome Harry, so far as those two were concerned had sunk below par.

CHAPTER XXIX.

THE SIGNAL FIRES.

WHEN the Heart of Oak Detective told his beautiful companion that they were safe it must be understood that he meant only for the time being.

Some seven or eight hours of darkness remained, during which they might reasonably believe they would suffer no molestation, but on the morrow would come the transformation scene.

Whether Arkansaw Amos and his gang would be able to track the missing animals by the hoof-prints in the road was uncertain. It would hardly seem likely and yet such might be the case, but by daylight, Zigzag and Miss Clarendon would be at Rialto, where they would abandon their animals and take refuge in some hiding-place.

As the detective explained, this would be near the railway station, so that they could reach and board the train whenever it came. But he did not explain that after seeing Miss Clarendon safely on the cars, he meant to leave her again.

His sphere of duty lay in that section and he did not intend to be driven from the field. The presence of Evelyn Clarendon, however, was a serious handicap; she must be got rid of by all means. He held her in too profound respect to allow anything to withdraw his attention from her, until her safety should be secured, but with her well out of the way, he would be prepared to address himself more seriously to the business before him.

An hour later, the couple, while riding along at the same leisurely rate and talking in low tones, noticed a high ridge almost resembling a mountain chain which was on their right and ran in a direction almost parallel to that which they were pursuing.

"It is in that ridge," said the detective, "that Arkansaw Amos and his men have their retreat. When hard pressed they break up and make their way to Devil's Den, as it is called, by different paths and there stay till the storm blows over."

"But why are they not followed by a force strong enough to capture or kill them all?" asked Evelyn, who had exaggerated ideas of the powers of the law officers.

"There are a good many reasons," replied Zigzag, who remembering that he had made known his identity to the lady, felt that it could do no harm to continue his confidence.

"In the first place, everybody in the neighborhood and for miles around are friends of the outlaws.

"Consequently, any attempt to track them into the mountains with the aid even of bloodhounds would be told to Arkansaw Amos and his men in time for them to get away.

"Then nobody except their own friends knew of their hiding-place, and I only learned it this evening from the conversation I overheard between Fred Ripley and the leader."

"Then you are going to try to follow them into the mountains?" she asked, looking inquiringly at him.

"I am," he said, firmly; "it'll be the greatest achievement of my life to root out Arkansaw Amos and his gang and there is no risk too great for me to undertake."

"But how are you going to bring your men to this place if the outlaws are always on the watch?"

The detective laughed.

"It is hardly worth while for me to attempt to explain a scheme whose general features only exist in my mind; but, if I am not mightily mistaken there will be music in the air before to-morrow's sun goes down."

Detective Zigzag shook his head as if in anticipation of the rare treasure that awaited him, while the bright eyes of Evelyn were never at rest.

Not fully sharing the faith of her escort that they were really safe, she was continually glancing in front, to the rear, and on either hand.

They had long since left the woods behind them, or rather the woods through which

they rode near the cabin of the outlaws. They passed several other stretches of forest, the trees mostly stunted, but the country as a rule was open, interspersed here and there with a bush similar to what is called the mesquite and which is so abundant in many parts of Texas.

Looking up at the ridge whose course was substantially parallel to their own, Evelyn saw the gleam of a fire on the very crest.

"What does that mean?" she asked, pointing her gloved hand in the direction.

"I'll be consarned," replied Uncle Peleg, "if it don't look as if some wood is burnin'."

"Isn't that an odd place to build a fire?" she asked, not satisfied with the jocular answer of her companion.

"That depends—but helloa! there's another!"

Probably less than two miles ahead, on the crest of a mountain ridge, but at a point where it swept to the left, was seen the twinkle of another fire.

The change of direction by the ridge, brought the second fire in front of the couple, so that it was fully as plain to them as was the one on their right which was no more than one fourth as far away.

While a single camp-fire on the crest of the ridge might mean nothing, yet the presumption was fair that when there were two, they had some signification.

If there was any doubt on this point, it was removed the next instant, while the eyes of both were fixed upon the fire which arose on their right.

A point of flame, undoubtedly the end of a brand lifted out of the blaze, separated from it and began a series of curious gyrations. Round and round, up and down, to the right and left it went, as if the man who was holding it had become crazy.

This continued several minutes and then stopped as suddenly as it began. Looking at the fire ahead, the same series of gyrations were to be seen, though at the distance named they were not so marked.

"It's plain enough what all that means," said Zigzag with the manner of one who was uneasy; "they are signaling to each other."

"Who?"

"That I cannot tell."

"Look yonder!"

Across the country to the left a third fire suddenly flashed out to view, being somewhat in advance of the first and perhaps a mile away.

The three were, therefore, so placed that a line running through them all would form an irregular triangle. And again for the third time, were the odd-looking signals observed by the wondering Zigzag and Evelyn Clarendon.

"I tell you what I think," she said after they had studied the strange sight.

"What's that?"

"Those signals refer to us."

"What makes you think so?"

"You told me that the outlaws have friends everywhere in this country. The leader and Fred have learned that we have come this way, and they have telegraphed in advance, by means of a signal fire which we have not noticed. Their friends are communicating with each other and laying their plans to capture us."

The theory sounded reasonable, but Zigzag the detective hoped his bright companion was mistaken.

CHAPTER XXX.

"HALT, RIGHT WHERE YOU ARE!"

EVELYN CLARENDON had her gaze fixed on the signal fire burning on the ridge at their right, when she exclaimed:

"Look!"

The detective who was gazing in the opposite direction turned his head like a flash.

"I see nothing," he said.

"That is why I told you to look."

"Where is the light we saw?"

"Vanished."

"So it has in front."

"And so it has on our left."

Such was the fact. The three camp or signal fires, as they may be called had disappeared as suddenly as they had burst upon the sight.

It was as if each was a lantern which was

suddenly extinguished by the blowing out of the light within.

"That is strange," said Zigzag, as if speaking to himself.

"What does it mean?"

"I wish I could tell you."

"But they were signals."

"No doubt of that."

"And they referred to us."

"I am afraid so."

"Had we not better turn back?"

"By no means: I would consider that fatal."

"What better can we do by pushing on?"

"We are well mounted."

"But they may appear in front."

"And are just as likely to be in the rear."

"We know the road over which we have come."

"Not much better than I know the one in front."

"You are the guide: why not better abandon our horses and hide ourselves?"

"It would only make our situation worse; the best thing for us to do is to hasten."

"I have wished that from the first."

"I will take the advance if you please."

Placing his animal in front, Detective Zigzag gave him rein and he broke into an easy gallop, the steed of Evelyn doing the same.

As they calculated, they had about five miles yet to travel before reaching the neighborhood of Rialto, where they meant to go into hiding until the chance should come for boarding the railway train.

They ought to reach the end of their journey considerably before daylight.

The country continued mostly open, though here and there were stretches of stunted forest, into which they penetrated with more misgiving than either was willing to admit to the other.

Evelyn had unbounded confidence in her escort, who had proven his bravery and skill more than once since their acquaintance, but there are hundreds of situations in which the greatest daring and subtlety are of no avail.

She believed they were surrounded by the friends of the outlaws who were closing in upon them, and how these enemies could be avoided was more than she could tell, though she did not despair by any means.

The highway over which they were riding was occasionally crossed by others, but none showed evidence of much travel, and since her guide stuck to the main highway she did not venture to make any objection.

To her it seemed far safer for them to abandon the horses and take refuge in the woods, there to await the opportunity to steal forth and pick their way to the railway station.

But bright and full of resources as she was, she felt too much respect for the detective to raise any objections.

Meanwhile they continued their rattling gallop.

It seemed singular that from the moment of Evelyn's mount of her horse they had not seen a person. The only evidence that they were in an inhabited country was the signal fires which so mystified them.

Two—three—four miles were passed at this rapid gait; the detective knew they were drawing near the lonely little railway station of Rialto.

From what he had been able to learn when on a former visit, this was about the same as the one presided over by the fresh young gentleman answering to the name of Tom.

There were no buildings in the neighborhood, but many of those who wished to board the train rode to Rialto from a distance of eight, ten, or more miles.

Still, he hoped to find some comfortable quarters where Evelyn could stay until morning.

It need not be said that all of Zigzag's senses were at the highest point, for he knew too well the necessity of them being thus held to allow any relaxation of diligence.

He scarcely spoke to Evelyn, who kept the nose of her horse almost against the haunch of his animal. She, too, was on the alert for sight or sound that would give some inkling of the nature of their peril.

To the right and left, to the front and rear, they continued to glance, but saw nothing of the signal fires that had startled them some distance back.

"Are we not near there?" she finally

called out, as Zigzag drew his horse down to a walk and she did the same, after placing hers alongside of his.

"Yes, I think this turn of the road leads to the station," he answered, drawing his horse to the right, and thus leaving the main highway.

"It cannot lack much of morning."

"Several hours yet."

"It will be tiresome waiting, but I can stand it."

"Keep a lookout for some building where you may spend the time more pleasantly than out doors."

"I am not afraid, so long as you will consent to act as my guardian."

"Hist! here's something," he said in an undertone, bringing his beast to a full stop.

Where they came from was impossible to say, but at that moment a dozen figures seemed to spring from the earth not more than fifty feet in front of them.

In the moonlight the gleam of more than one Winchester barrel was seen as the rifles were leveled at the astounded couple.

"Halt! right where you are!" called the leader, in tones which left no choice but to obey.

CHAPTER XXXI.

THE VIGILANTES.

HAD the Heart of Oak Detective been alone when thus ordered to surrender, he would not have obeyed.

The fierce-looking men in sombreros who ordered him to halt were not only dismounted, but were all in front, and he was confident that he could wheel his horse and dash away at lightning speed.

He and his animal would run considerable risk from the bullets that would be sent hurtling after him, but that was one of the inevitable perils which men in his profession must be prepared for at all times.

By flinging himself forward on the animal's neck he would stand a fair chance of escaping, but the recourse was not to be thought of where the safety of Evelyn Clarendon was involved. His first duty was to her, all of which emphasizes the fact that has already been stated, namely, that her presence seriously handicapped his movements.

There were eight men who advanced from the scraggy undergrowth, where they had been crouching, and confronted Zigzag and Evelyn.

They were typical Texans, with their big-brimmed sombreros, trowsers tucked into their boots, coarse blue and red shirts, while they seemed to bristle all over with weapons.

They evidently were in waiting for some person or persons, so that it may be said that our friends rode directly into a trap.

At first the Texans did not notice that one of the strangers was a lady. When they discovered that fact, however, they gave expression to their sentiments in the usual exaggerated fashion.

"Ride forward and don't try to draw," added the man who had ordered them to halt.

"Wal, I'll be consarned if I see much use in drawin'," replied the detective, dropping into the character of Uncle Peleg, "bein' as there seems to be 'bout thirty-seven and a half times as many of you as there be of us."

The words and manner of Uncle Peleg seemed to amuse the Texans, who gathered around the two horses as they halted.

The detective carefully scrutinized the faces as best he could in the moonlight, but there was not one among them whom he could recognize, and it was hardly to be expected that it should be so.

"That's a purty piece of hossflesh you've got there," remarked one of the captors, rubbing the nose of the bloodied animal ridden by Uncle Peleg, while another patted the neck of the beast.

"Whar did you get him?" asked the leader.

"I stole him."

"Where?"

"About ten miles back."

"Who from?"

"Arkansaw Amos; that 'ere critter that the lady is onto was stole from Handsome Harry, another of the pesky gang."

The blunt avowal of Uncle Peleg fairly

took away the breath of the party gathered around him, for they no more expected to hear the words than did Evelyn Clarendon.

Trying as was her situation, under the scrutiny of the lawless band, she turned toward her friend in amazement.

"Why, Uncle Peleg, what do you mean?" she asked.

"Ain't that the gospel truth? I was always tort up in New Hampshire to tell the truth and that's what I'm bound to do if it takes the hide off."

In explanation, it may be said that the detective was so fairly caught that no denial he could make would avail anything, being in the situation, therefore, of him who makes a virtue of necessity. But the effect was widely different from what he expected.

As soon as the leader of the party had recovered from his surprise, he asked Zigzag to dismount and step aside with him a few minutes.

The detective looked doubtfully at Evelyn.

"The lady can stay where she is; nobody will bring a blush to her cheek. If a single one of these fellers says a single swear word I'll knock his head off!"

There is no man naturally more chivalrous than a Texan, and as the leader spoke, he doffed his sombrero and the others did the same, several making remarks intended to indorse the sentiments of their leader.

"The old man don't often hit the truth," said one, "cause he allers aims too wild, but he struck the bull's eye that time."

"Yes, ma'am; we've all got sisters and mothers," added another still holding his hat in his hand, "and we'll treat you white."

"I haven't the least doubt of that," said Evelyn, whose womanly instinct told her that, rough and forbidding as the men were, they nevertheless spoke the sentiments of their hearts.

"You're right," said one of them; "we ain't much on beauty but as our pard jes' now said, we're white."

Evelyn laughed, nodded and looked down on them in such a bewitching way that they all felt as though they would like to shoot each other just to prove their devotion to her.

Meanwhile, the leader had drawn the detective to one side where they were beyond the hearing of the others.

"My name is Max Huffnagle—what's yours?"

"Uncle Peleg Thurman from New Hampshire."

"That won't do; come, I've been square—I don't want any lying; where did you come from?"

"I was on the train that was robbed yesterday afternoon about ten miles down the road."

Seeing that it was idle to continue his character of Uncle Peleg, the detective spoke in his ordinary fashion.

"Is that so?" asked Huffnagle with deep interest.

"Yes, and the lady was with me."

"How comes it that you are travelin' this lonely road at this hour?"

"We're on our way to Rialto—how far is it?"

"Not more than a quarter of a mile off yonder; why are you here?"

"Let me give you my story."

And the detective did so as succinctly as possible, his companion seeming to hold his breath while listening.

Of course the Heart of Oak Detective strove to suppress his own identity, explaining that the outlaws were so suspicious of every one that he found it wise to leave while he had the chance.

He took the horses by way of retaliation, though he intended to leave them at Rialto, so that the owners could recover them again.

By this time Zigzag had formed the conclusion that the men who had captured him and his companion were not members of the gang of Arkansaw Amos.

But who were they? They might be equally unpleasant companions, but he did not think so.

"Did you observe any fires burning to the right and left and sort of promiscuously round the country as you come along?" asked Huffnagle.

"We saw a number of signal fires, I suppose they were."

"Yes—that was it. We built the one near here and the rest of our friends the others."

"Do they refer to us?"

"You? No," replied Huffnagle in amazement; "nothing of the kind; what do you suppose we are?"

"I'm sure I can't guess."

"We are Vigilantes, and we're after Arkansaw Amos and his gang!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

A NEW COMBINE.

ZIGZAG was astonished. It had never once entered his thoughts that the band of men were those who meant to take the law in their own hands.

While Judge Lynch is one of the most popular individuals in the Southwest, it did not appear possible that Arkansaw Amos and the desperate gang he had gathered around him were in peril from that cause.

It seemed to the officer that they were circumstanced similarly to the notorious James Younger organizations; that is, the very terror of the men prevented an effective formation against them.

Indeed, the great outlaws owed their escape more than once to the friendly aid of the people in whose neighborhood they plied their daring calling.

It will be understood, too, that if a company of Vigilantes took the business in charge it would of necessity interfere with the detective's "combine."

But he was as powerless to restrain the wrath of the peaceable citizens when once aroused, as he was to chain the cyclone then sweeping across the prairies.

The wisest thing for the detective to do was to join forces with these men, and he grasped the situation with that quickness of mind which was natural to him.

Glancing around, he noticed that Evelyn seemed to be well entertained by the other men, who had evidently given her an account of themselves, so that she felt no doubt that she was among friends. At any rate, she and they were talking and laughing as though they had been acquaintances from childhood.

"She won't mind if I leave her with them a while longer," was the conclusion of the detective.

"Well, Max," said he in his off-hand fashion, "I must say that you have given me a complete surprise."

"That's what I thought," remarked the other with a chuckle, "but you haven't yet told me who you are."

"I am a detective."

"I knew it."

"Why, then, did you press me for an answer?"

"To see whether you would lie or not?"

"I can hardly lay claim to be truthful, since my profession is founded on deception."

"Did you expect to scoop in old Arkansaw and the rest of 'em without any help?" asked Huffnagle with another laugh.

"Hardly; I was to find the lay of the land, as they say, and when that was done call on my friends to help me."

"Have you l'arned anything?"

"Considerable."

"What is it?"

The detective did not hesitate, for the case was one of those in which half-confidence was worse than none at all.

"Three of the gang were killed to-day, and two, if not more, wounded; there are thirteen left."

"That sounds purty near right, though we thought thar was more of the varmints."

"That is the number given by Arkansaw Amos himself."

"To you?"

"Hardly; I heard him name it to Hand-some Harry when he had no suspicion that I overheard the words."

"Then it's correct."

"Their retreat is in Devil's Den, about ten miles from the spot where we are standing this minute."

The impulsive Huffnagle thrust out his hand.

"Shake! you're a trump."

"I am complimented by the praise of a brave man."

"What are you going to do?"

"Join forces with you."

"We're glad to have you, but what have you done?"

"I got a dispatch through to Dallas, which will result in bringing five determined and skillful men to our help."

"That's good, but they wouldn't have amounted to nothin' alone."

"I don't blame you for thinking so," said Zigzag, significantly, "but if you knew them as well as I, you would not say so."

"It don't do in fighting Arkansaw Amos to try it with one-half his number; when do you expect your friends?"

"They ought to reach Rialto by ten o'clock to-morrow."

"That may be in time to give a little help."

"But tell me," added Zigzag, "how it is that you have combined against these people? The opinion is abroad that they were always safe in counting on your help."

"Thar's been good reason for that belief," answered Huffnagle, frankly; "I don't deny that I myself have given old Arkansaw, Jubilee Juggens, Snork, Long Lige, and some of the others more than one lift."

"What has turned you against them?"

The detective saw the flash of the man's eyes as he answered:

"Do you know whar Arkansaw got that hoss that you was a-straddle of?"

"I don't doubt that he stole it!"

"So he did—from me, too! And that boootiful mare, that ain't half as purty as the lady perched on her like a bird of Paradise—that's the property of Buck Gilligan, that is a-grin-ning and talking to her this very minute."

"So they have become horse-thieves, have they?"

"That's it—them train-robbers have got as low as that," said Huffnagle, with a contemptuous sniff.

The detective smiled to himself, for his friend was in earnest. The most execrated crime in Texas, as we have said, is that of horse-stealing.

"More than likely then that the rest of the gang have stolen the animals which they ride."

"There's no doubt about it. When Arkansaw got his boys together three or four years ago, he and them all acted like gentlemen; they confined themselves to holdin' up trains and stages (though there ain't enough stages to make it pay), scoopin' in their hoss-flesh outside of Texas and when they wanted anything of us they paid for it.

"As long as they done that and acted squar', we done the same with them. We give 'em a lift when they needed it and everything was lovely till they changed their way of doing business."

"What was the cause of that?"

"Swelled head; they made so much money that they begun to look down on us; the next day they shot some of our neighbors; insulted our wives and—just what I feared—began to steal hosses from us! *that* settled thar fate!" exclaimed the other in a voice so loud and savage that it turned every eye toward him.

"Well, Max, I am greatly relieved to find that the young lady and myself are among friends; and now let us understand each other: how are you going about the business?"

"Remember there isn't going to be any foolishness; them signal fires that you seen were agreed on two weeks ago. I've been gettin' up this enterprise—that is me and Buck Gilligan; it was agreed that when everything was ready, then signal fires were to be lit up on the ridge back of us. The boys was to light theirs and swing a torch or two to let us know they was ready and they was to meet over yender at the house."

"How many are there?"

"If they all come there'll be about twenty and every man is a fighter too!"

"No one can doubt that; what house do you mean?"

"My own," replied Max turning half-way round and pointing in the direction of the railway station.

CHAPTER XXXIII.

LYING IN WAIT.

THE information that the house of Huffnagle the leader of the Vigilantes was within a short distance suggested the appropriateness of placing Miss Clarendon there.

When Zigzag made the proposition, the

man accepted it at once, apologizing for not thinking of it before.

The two walked back to the group who were laughing and talking with Evelyn and all of the opinion that she was the most splendid young lady that they had ever heard or read about.

"What a fortunate thing it is. Uncle Peleg, that we came across such gentlemen!" called out Evelyn; "I never met a finer lot in all my life."

"I agree with you," was the hearty response of the detective; "Max and I have had a talk; I suppose you know that the boys here are a portion of the party that have met to rid the country of the train-robbers."

"Yes, they have told me the whole story and a great deal more; I know all their names, where they live, how large families they have, and a great deal more that I don't mean to tell you for it came to me in confidence."

"I'll guarantee your power to keep a secret, but I've let Max also know that I am a detective down here on the same business as he and his friends."

This announcement drew attention to the honest-looking old farmer. But not for long. Nothing short of an earthquake or cyclone could have kept the eyes of the cowboys from the lady.

"Max lives near by and he invites you to go to the house and spend what is left of the night with his family."

"He is just as kind as the rest of them."

"I wonder whether some one of these gentlemen won't volunteer to show you the way."

The whole seven came near tumbling over each other and fighting in their furious eagerness to act the part of guide.

"What's the matter with you?" demanded Max, striding to the front and taking the bridle of his own horse. "I'm the one to attend to this little matter."

"Of course," laughed Buck Gilligan, stepping back, "Max was born so party that he can't help it, but if he goes to spooning around her, won't his wife pull his hair?"

Max laughed with the others over this good-natured raillery, and catching up the reins, he vaulted into the saddle, seating himself with the grace that seems natural to a cowboy, and invited Evelyn to follow him, promising the rest that he would soon be back.

It proved as Max had said.

They had ridden only a few hundred yards when they drew rein in front of a low, comfortable-looking house, somewhat similar to the cabin already described, except that it was larger.

Late as was the hour, a light was still burning within.

Max had a good, devoted wife, who, knowing the dangerous business on which he was engaged, kept everything ready for his coming, no matter when it might be.

Leaping from his horse he helped Evelyn down, and the next minute opened his own door. His wife had heard him, and entered the dimly lit room with a bewildered look.

She might well wonder at the sight of his companion, but the story was quickly told.

Mrs. Huffnagle saw that there was but one thing proper, and that was to give her beauteous guest the rest of which she stood in such sore need. So she was conducted to one of the three rooms above, where a warm, clean bed awaited her.

Feeling at last that she was safe, Miss Clarendon resigned herself to sweet, sound, refreshing sleep.

"You haven't told me your full plan," said Zigzag, when Huffnagle returned and informed his eager friends that no accident had befallen the young lady, and that the whole two hundred yards were passed in safety.

He left his horse and that of Buck Gilligan in his own stable.

"There ain't much about it—we want to wipe 'em out afore they can reach Devil's Den, for, if they once get there, they'll make an ugly fight."

"You intend to take them on the fly, so to speak?"

"Yes; after the boys come up, we will hide ourselves along the road, just like so many Injuns, and when they come in range, open on 'em till every saddle is emptied."

The detective shuddered.

Accustomed as he was to scenes of violence, there was something terrible in this wholesale wiping out of a dozen or more men.

"But they may not come this way."

"This is the road they generally take; if they happen to go by another we'll have to follow 'em to the Den."

"How is it you and your men are not mounted?" asked Zigzag, looking around at the sturdy fellows.

"Haven't I told you that most of our hosses has been stole by Arkansaw Amos and his men?"

It was all clear now.

Although Max had given the outlaws the general name of horse-thieves, yet the detective supposed that it was only in a general way, and that aside from the two instances named, the gang had not committed any very flagrant offenses lately.

He was under the impression that it was the train robbery that was the cause of this sudden rallying. In other words, that the crime of the preceding day was the last feather upon the camel's back, but it was far different.

In order to make ready for that wholesale robbery, the gang had replenished their stock of horses by a wholesale levy that had roused this fierce opposition to them.

"I s'pose some of the rest will be mounted," added Max by way of explanation, "and we might raise an animal or two, being as you've brought back a couple o' 'em."

While the leader of the small company was holding this conversation with the detective, he and the rest were not sitting down nor standing still, but they kept moving about and glancing here and there, as if fearful of a surprise, or that something would escape them.

The moon was almost overhead, and shining from an unclouded sky. To the north extended the high, wooded and rocky ridge, of which mention has been several times made, and in which, some ten miles away, the train-robbers had their chosen retreat.

The air was cool, but not unpleasantly so, and it need not be said that the little company were wide awake and vigilant. Max began to give expression to impatience, because of the delay in the arrival of his allies. He had been at work for hours, and the signals that had been exchanged proved that everything was understood.

All at once, one of the men pointed to the crest of the ridge on their left, as they faced in the direction over which the detective and the young lady had come.

Less than a mile away another signal-fire was seen to be burning brightly.

"What does that mean?" asked Max with an impatient exclamation; "that ain't accordin' to rule."

None of the men could explain it.

The arrangement as made by Max Huffnagle was that he should give the signal, to which the others were to respond, to show that they understood what was required, after which they were to extinguish their own fires, and hasten to join their leader.

CHAPTER XXXIV.

BETRAYED.

"If I may be allowed to suggest," said the detective, "the meaning of that fire is that something has gone wrong."

"But what can it be?" asked Huffnagle.

The detective shrugged his shoulders.

"That is one of the things that have to be found out."

"Hark! some one is coming."

The sound of horse's hoofs was heard by all, being those of a steed under full gallop, and he was approaching from the direction taken by the last two arrivals.

The next minute the figure of a horse and his rider loomed to view in the moonlight.

Catching sight of the group in the road he reined up short and called out:

"Helloa! Max, is that you?"

"Yes—what's up?"

"The mischief is to pay; they have taken t'other road."

"Sure of that?"

"No mistake; you and the boys come over to Bill's; but I'm afraid we'll be too late."

And without another word, the horseman wheeled about and dashed off at the reckless speed with which he had approached.

The news he had brought was a disappointment and the cowboys naturally indulged in some strong expressions, but there was no help for it.

"We'll go down to the house and Buck and I will mount our hosses," said Max; "we'll scoot across the country as fast as we can. It'll be our luck to get there too late."

"How far off is the road that Arkansaw and his men have taken?" asked the detective.

"About half a mile; it won't take us long to reach it, but if that chap knows they've took t'other road, the scamps can't be far off."

"Who was the messenger?" asked Zigzag.

"I couldn't tell by his voice, but he must have been one of the boys."

The rest of the party being appealed to, were unable to identify him, which fact caused Zigzag some uneasiness.

"Why didn't he come closer, so that we could see him?"

"I s'pose 'cause he was in such a hurry."

"Perhaps it's all right," remarked the detective, who had lit a cigar, "but it has an odd look to me."

"What do you think?" asked Max, turning upon him.

"Things are in a queer shape, my friend; I may be wrong, but I have a strong suspicion that that man was not a friend."

"Who then?"

"I shouldn't be surprised if he was one of Arkansaw's men, and that he came up on purpose to throw you off the track."

But Huffnagle would not agree that this could be the case. There was an audacity in such a thing that made it impossible that it should be attempted.

Besides, he asked, with some reason, how could any of the outlaws know of the steps under way against them?

The detective saw that his theory was not satisfactory, and, without changing his belief, he quietly remarked that he guessed he was mistaken, and the plan of the leader had better be followed.

He started in company with him and Buck Gilligan to the house of the former, as they wished to get their horses without delay.

Those who had to foot it hurried off at once, so as to lose no time. They cut across the intervening country, which was covered mostly with scrub growth, though numerous open places occurred here and there.

A strong wish came over Detective Zigzag, when he entered the house of Huffnagle, to stay there.

It seemed to him that there was a risk in leaving the family, including Evelyn Clarendon, entirely unprotected.

Still, as his former proposition had been received with such disfavor, he decided to follow the men, even though, like most of them, he would be obliged to walk.

To his surprise, after he had been introduced to the wife of Huffnagle, the husband said.

"I'll be obliged to you, if you will stay here for awhile at least."

"Why do you ask me?"

"I'd rather not leave the folks alone; there's my wife and two children besides the lady you brought with you; we've two rifles in the house, and, being as you haven't a hoss, you may as well wait till you hear from us."

"I will do so," said Zigzag, secretly glad of the request; "but I hope I shall have the pleasure of being in at the death."

"We'll attend to that."

And calling a hasty good-bye to his thin, pale-faced wife, the brave fellow hurried out the door and joined Buck Gilligan, who was impatiently awaiting him.

A minute later the sound of the hoofs of their galloping horses died out in the distance.

The detective turned about to exchange a few words with the lady of the house when he found himself confronted by Miss Clarendon, who, having heard the voices, had descended the stairs.

She smiled as she greeted him and taking a chair, said:

"You hardly expected to see me?"

"Indeed I did not; I supposed you were sound asleep."

"I was, but the words of you and your friends awoke me."

"Since you would like to talk awhile," said Mrs. Huffnagle, "I will leave you alone."

"We have nothing to say which we would wish you not to hear," said Evelyn, deeply grateful for the kindness shown her.

Nevertheless the woman showed her good sense by withdrawing, after indicating to Zigzag the room which he would occupy when he was ready to retire.

He thanked her and said he would not lie down at all, but would stay where he was until morning.

What a strange, incomprehensible thing is memory! It cannot be coaxed or driven, but works in its own mysterious way, governed by laws beyond the power of human comprehension.

Detective Zigzag turned toward his fair companion, and had framed his lips to utter an important question, when he sprung from his chair as if bitten by a rattlesnake.

In that instant, with the suddenness of the lightning's flash, the problem over which he had been racking his brain for hours was solved.

He recalled the identity of Fred Ripley!

"Great heavens!" he muttered, "why did I not think of it before?"

He actually turned pale and trembled with agitation, and Evelyn looked at him as if she suspected he had gone crazy.

"What is the matter, Uncle Peleg?"

He was too much moved to reply except in his own character. He looked wildly at her for a moment, and then, reaching out, took her hand, which she gave him hesitatingly.

"Evelyn," said he with the solemnity of a dying man, "Fred Ripley told you that the time would come when you would admit you did him injustice for the part he is acting, did he not?"

"He did."

"He told you the truth! He is a brave and true man, worthy of your confidence; distrust him no longer. If you do not learn the whole truth from him to-morrow you shall from me."

The amazed girl was about to speak, when the detective sprung again to his feet.

He had heard suspicious sounds out of doors.

"We have been betrayed!" he exclaimed, hastening to fasten the door; "the outlaws are upon us."

CHAPTER XXXV.

TREASON IN THE CAMP.

THE cabins of the Texan settlers as a rule are not very striking in their architectural beauty, but they are strong and durable, being built for use rather than appearance.

Detective Zigzag sounded the alarm before he was certain of the identity of the shadowy figures on the outside, but he knew they could not be Huffnagle and the friendly cowboys who had formed themselves into a Vigilance Committee.

In the building there were three rooms on the lower floor and the same number on the upper.

One of the former was used as a bedroom by Huffnagle and his wife, and the second was occupied by the children.

The third was that in which Detective Zigzag and Evelyn Clarendon were sitting when the alarm came.

Neither of the bedrooms had a window. The light they received came from the dining-room, which had a front door and a rear and front window.

The wife was too nervous to sleep. She had lain down without removing her clothing and she now ran out into the other and larger room.

Zigzag was fumbling at the door, uncertain of the best way to fasten it, when she caught up the heavy bar from the corner, placed it across the opening, and the house was made as secure as possible.

The two open windows remained.

She stepped quickly to the front one and peered cautiously out, Evelyn standing close behind her and Uncle Peleg, as she preferred to call him.

"Can you recognize any of them?" he asked in a whisper.

"They belong to the band of Arkansaw Amos," she answered, without turning her head; "there is Jubilee Juggens, Si Snork—yes," she added, with some excitement, "and those two men on horseback are Handsome Harry and Arkansaw himself."

It may be said that every one of the out-

laws had ridden to the spot on horseback, but on reaching the cabin, they dismounted with the exception of the two named.

They had reined up and were in plain sight, as they sat side by side, talking together in low tones.

The others leaving their animals a short distance, were gathered in the open space in front, talking in the same guarded manner, while several were moving to and fro, as if making a reconnoissance, before opening their attack.

Two or three were away on special duty, but it may be said that the band itself was gathered in front of the house of Max Huffnagle in the small hours of that autumn morning, drawn thither by the strongest motive that can actuate such persons—that of revenge upon Detective Zigzag for the clever trick he had played upon them.

He had not only lain down and slept in their lair, and taken away the beautiful lady guest, but, worst crime of all, he had gone off with the two choicest of the stolen animals in the possession of the gang!

That was unpardonable, for Arkansaw Amos could forgive any offense before that.

So, calling all of his company that he could about him, he had mounted them and started north after the fleeing couple.

The reader may well wonder where the leader got all this important information, but there is no cause for wonder.

The reason was that which has lost many a battle and ruined many a cause, being—treachery.

One of the neighbors on whom Huffnagle and the rest chiefly relied was a cunning traitor.

The hours spent by Max in perfecting his plans gave the miscreant time to warn Arkansaw Amos. Not only that, but he learned that the detective and lady had ridden northward in company.

It was evident that they were making for Rialto station, with the purpose of boarding the morning train, and the anger of Arkansaw against the detective was so fierce that he subordinated everything to "squaring accounts" with him.

The traitor who gave the outlaw the valuable news corrupted two others, one of whom rode up in front of Huffnagle and his men, and called out that the robbers had taken the other road.

Had the man spoken in his natural tones, he would have been recognized, but he disguised his voice, and it will be seen that he had good reason to wish his features to remain invisible.

To the suggestion of the traitors was due also the starting of the fire which puzzled his neighbors so much. Knowing that the party were lying in wait, Arkansaw Amos and Handsome Harry agreed that it was wise to get them out the way before going forward.

It was easy enough for the train-robbers to take the route which they were represented to have taken, but that would have led them considerably out of the way, besides which, it would defeat the prime object of this night ride to the northward.

The shooting of Uncle Peleg had been unalterably determined upon by Arkansaw Amos.

The leader must have felt, too, that it was time for serious thought, when his neighbors organized themselves into a Vigilance Committee, for the purpose of ridding the country of him and his followers. He saw that it was likely to be inconvenient, but as for fear of the consequences—it would not be just to say that he had any, for he despised the peaceable inhabitants around him.

If the movement should become formidable, he had only to dissolve his company and choose another rendezvous than Devil's Den.

He had a famous retreat in the Ozark Mountains of Arkansas (where Amos had earned his peculiar appellation), to which he could direct those of his men whom he wished to look after; the rest might take care of themselves.

Far removed from Texas, Arkansaw and his followers could laugh to scorn the utmost efforts of the Vigilantes.

But Max Huffnagle was the moving spirit in the organization of the outraged inhabitants, and it was necessary to pay their compliments to him before their departure, and

since Uncle Peleg and the young lady had taken refuge there, it will be observed that everything seemed to conspire to help these special pets of Satan.

Huffnagle and the rest of his men had been sent off on a wild-goose chase; and, if Arkansaw managed the business with discretion, they were not likely to return for hours, which would give the robbers abundant opportunity to carry out their ferocious designs.

It will be remembered that, by the narrowest chance possible, Zigzag had stayed in the cabin, never dreaming that it was the thing which Arkansaw Amos wanted him above all things to do.

Through the aid of his several traitors, Huffnagle and the rest who hastened to the rendezvous a half-mile away on another road, were made to believe that the train robbers were in advance.

Since most of the men were on foot, it was absurd to think of overhauling them. Nevertheless, the start was made, the expectation of the pursuers being that the decisive struggle would take place at Devil's Den; in the mountains.

CHAPTER XXXVI.

STILL ON DECK.

THE sound of firing would be likely to reach the ears of Huffnagle and his party and excite their suspicion.

The orders of Arkansaw Amos, therefore, to his men were not to use their guns or pistols unless they got the drop on the detective, but to secure entrance to the building or the capture of the man by other means.

True, Uncle Peleg was liable to indulge in the use of firearms but being discharged within the house, the noise was not likely to be heard far away.

Since there were a number of other men waiting for Huffnagle, it will be understood that if an inkling of the truth reached them and they turned about to hasten to the imperiled cabin, they would make a force formidable enough to enliven matters with the outlaws.

The reconnaissance confirmed the suspicion that Huffnagle and one of his men had ridden off, for there were no animals in the stable.

Arkansaw called a couple of his followers to him, said something in a low tone, and then they walked toward the door of the cabin, but previous to this and directly after the door had been fastened by the wife, Uncle Peleg remarked:

"Your husband said that he had two Winchesters at our command."

"Here they are," she replied, darting into the bedroom and bringing the weapons forth; "you take one and I'll keep the other."

"And I've got my pistol," was the cool remark of Evelyn; "how shall we station ourselves?"

"You at the front," said the wife, addressing Uncle Peleg, "and I at the rear."

"And I?" queried Evelyn.

"I guess it doesn't make much difference where you stand," was the rather blunt remark of the woman.

"You would not say that, if you'd seen her shoot one of the gang yesterday," remarked Uncle Peleg.

"If she did *that*," replied the astonished woman, "she can take my gun."

"No," replied Evelyn, "I am not accustomed to a rifle; I will stand near Uncle Peleg while you guard the rear."

Thus they stationed themselves.

At that moment a couple of men advanced and gave a resounding knock upon the door.

"Who's there?" asked Zigzag, standing far enough to one side of the window to be out of range of any stray shot.

"Friends," was the answer.

"What do you want?"

"To come in."

"You aren't good-looking enough," was the amazing response of Uncle Peleg.

"If you don't open the door we'll batter it in."

"And ef you onery cusses try to do *that*, I'll batter you in—I'll be consarned if I don't!"

"What's the use of talkin' with the old fool?" called Arkansaw Amos from his horse. "Stave in the door!"

The outlaw raised his boot and gave the door a furious kick. Immediately Uncle

Peleg brought his gun to his shoulder and let fly.

He felt that it was idle to trifl, but he did not wish to kill a man merely for knocking at the portal in an aboriginal style; so he sent the bullet into the offending leg of the robber, who, with a shrieking howl, caught hold of the injured limb, with both hands, and went hopping back among his companions.

This rough reception was unexpected, though the outlaws were not such fools as to suppose that the detective would surrender, when he could not fail to know the fate intended for him.

"I told you I wouldn't stand no sich nonsense," called out Uncle Peleg, making his gun ready for use again on "demand."

"We'll cook your goose," was the commentary of the enraged Arkansaw, as he dismounted, but took care to keep beyond immediate reach of the dangerous detective.

It began to look to him as though nothing could be accomplished without a fierce fight, and it was clear that Uncle Peleg meant to go down, if such was to be his fate, with colors flying.

Since the detective was stationed at the front, there was reason to suspect that the rear was not so well guarded.

Two of the outlaws were already prospecting on that side—they had been inside of the house before and knew all about it. They were well aware that the wife of a true Texan is able to do her full share at such a time; but, inasmuch as the husband was away with one gun, and Uncle Peleg had another, it was fair to suppose that there were no more.

But, too late they realized their mistake, for the outlaw who was stealthily moving toward the window, like a crouching Apache, met the flash of the gun whose muzzle was almost in his face, and went over backward, killed so quickly that he had no time to utter an exclamation.

"That's right," called Uncle Peleg, encouragingly; "you attend to matters over there, and I'll do the same here."

"You've got to do better than you've been doing, then," was the curt reply of the wife, "for my man didn't holler after he was hit, like yours. I shoot to kill, now!"

"I don't think the *next* one I bring down will do so," replied the detective, with a smile, feeling at the same time that the only thing to do under the circumstances was to shoot to kill.

Arkansaw Amos now realizing that he had a pretty big job on hand to secure the detective, either dead or alive, gave the order for his men to shoot whenever and wherever they saw a chance.

"We must wind up his clock before any of the rest get back," was his thought.

By a preconcerted agreement, three of the best marksmen sent their shots into the front window simultaneously, one going straight through the middle, and the others crossing, so as to cover all the space possible.

"I guess that fetched him," muttered Arkansaw, who was attentively watching the window.

Before Handsome Harry could reply, a loud voice came from within:

"If you consarned folks ain't more keerful, you'll hurt somebody—that is, mebbe you will, *by accident!*"

Unquestionably, Uncle Peleg was still on deck.

CHAPTER XXXVII.

BACK AGAIN.

In the stillness of that cool autumn night, more than one strange proceeding took place.

Some of these were the result of exceedingly close calculations, while others were caused by miscalculations.

Had Detective Zigzag arranged to receive a reply to the two telegrams which he sent to Dallas, he would have been enlightened on more than one vital point; but, as is known, no reply came to him, and he was working on the theory that the help for which he asked was likely to arrive the next day about ten o'clock.

We say was likely to do so, for the chances were that the train would follow the general rule, and be several hours late.

But we have shown that there was treason in one of the bands who were actors in the

events of which we are writing, and it is now proper to state that there was treachery also on the other side.

Detective Zigzag did not doubt that the telegram which he forwarded to his friends in Dallas was the first news received by them of the holding up of the train; but in this supposition he erred, for it was known to certain parties within one hour of its occurrence. Indeed, while the exasperated robbers were vainly hammering on the stubborn safe, it was told many miles away.

As a consequence, the five determined detectives who held themselves in readiness to fight to the death for the capture or destruction of Arkansaw Amos and his gang, started that much earlier than Zigzag expected, and were therefore due that much sooner at Rialto station.

Since the railway authorities were equally anxious to run to earth the band of outlaws that were bringing the fair fame of the Lone Star State into disrepute, they lent every possible facility to the representatives of the law.

They were expecting something of the kind, and did not compel the officers to wait for the regular train. An extra, consisting simply of the engine, tender and one freight-car (the latter to avoid creating suspicion) was dispatched from Dallas, just as night was closing in and at the moment the outlaws were compelled to confess themselves beaten in trying to break open the safe.

And in still another quarter was there an important issue based on a cause beyond the suspicion of the brilliant detective.

It will be remembered that he and Huffnagle had a rather sharp dispute concerning the unexpected signal fire and the action of the messenger who brought word that the outlaws had taken another road to Devil's Den.

Zigzag believed that this messenger was a friend of the robbers, and had deceived the Vigilantes, but Huffnagle would not believe it, though it has been shown that the former was right. Among the cowboys who belonged to the Vigilantes were several who placed considerable weight upon what the detective said.

One of these was Buck Gilligan, who, as he galloped across the country toward the rendezvous beside his leader, did not hesitate to express his belief that crooked work was going on.

Max maintained his position, though it was clear from his manner that he, too, was beginning to have his doubts, but they pushed on, reaching the other highway a few minutes behind the men who had started on foot.

Among those who had preceded the two horsemen by such a brief space of time were several who held to the same opinion as Buck Gilligan. It naturally followed, therefore, that a lively dispute was under way.

There were five horsemen awaiting the arrival of the re-enforcements that had just reached them, and the report they gave was not calculated to add to the strength of the position taken by Max Huffnagle.

The messenger who had warned the others had taken almost the same course with them; that is, he had ridden up within earshot and called out to them that the outlaws would soon be along that road, and that Huffnagle and his boys would shortly be on hand to insure a warm reception for the gang after which the stranger dashed off and had not been seen since.

Max was grum and silent.

The conviction was rapidly fastening itself upon him that he had been made the victim of a shrewd trick, but a man is naturally stubborn, and there is no saying how long he would have held out against his own belief, except for a startling occurrence.

He was sitting on his horse, silent and thoughtful, and looking off in the direction of his own home, and wondering whether it was likely to affect the dear ones whom he had left with but a single protector.

His distressful state of mind was suddenly intensified by the dull but certain report of a gun which reached him through the stillness of the night.

There could be no doubt of the direction whence it came, for it was either from his own home or from a point fearfully near it.

All doubt and hesitation on his part vanished on the instant.

"Boys," said he, "the devil is to pay! We have been tricked! I own up! I've been made a fool of, but I hope it isn't too late! You that have hosses keep with me and the rest foller as fast as you can!"

Striking his heels against the side of his blooded animal and uttering a shout to him, he galloped across the country with the speed of the wind.

Buck Gilligan and the other five who were mounted, were beside him or at his heels, while those on foot broke into the double-quick.

Max's breast became a raging furnace, as borne upon the wind which whistled by his face he caught the sound of firing again. His horse fairly flew over the ground, but it seemed to the rider that he was moving at a snail's pace.

The reports of the three guns fired by the outlaws simultaneously rung out with piercing distinctness. There was no longer any doubt in the mind of Huffnagle.

"Some one has betrayed us to him! He knows that I am at the bottom of this vigilance business and he is determined to take his revenge upon my loved ones."

The ranchman continued his thundering pace and must soon reach the spot although it seemed to him that he would never do so.

"The coward!" he muttered, grinding his teeth together; "he has more men than we, and yet he daresn't attack us! He waits until we are all drawn away and then brings his whole lot against the house. What possessed me to ask the detective to stay? He is a brave man but he can do nothing against so many."

The impatient Vigilante glanced behind him. Buck Gilligan was several rods to the rear, and the others were strung along at varying distances, while his own horse was proving his blood and mettle. It made no difference; had Max Huffnagle been entirely alone he would have dashed among the outlaws and begun firing right and left. When protecting his loved and helpless ones, the weakest man becomes a lion in strength and bravery.

CHAPTER XXXVIII.

IN AT THE DEATH.

THE engine and car containing the five men steamed rapidly northward through the solemn stillness, with a speed which surpassed that of the ordinary passenger trains.

And, after all, that isn't saying a great deal.

The same friend within the camp of the outlaws had notified the leader of the party that the disembarkation would take place at Rialto, but of course this man could not have foreseen the stirring occurrences that were to take place in that immediate vicinity. He believed that to leave the cars at any other point would draw suspicion to the officers which was likely to defeat their very purpose. So it was that it was the most fortunate thing which could have happened.

As the engineer drew near the well-known spot he moved slowly, so that the engine had the appearance of a monster creeping stealthily upon its prey, and in point of fact that was just what it was doing.

Slower and slower advanced the ponderous engine, until it came to a standstill directly opposite the lonely station, where not a light was burning nor a soul to be seen.

The men stood still for a minute, uncertain which way to move or what to do.

Faint as was the rumble of the approaching engine, it was plainly heard by the outlaws, who paid no attention to it, or, more properly, only one of them did so. He knew, or at least suspected what it meant.

The five men were standing at the station, debating in whispers the proper course to follow, when they were startled by the near report of a gun.

There had been firing before but they did not hear it while in the cars. They were about to advance in that direction when a low, guarded whistle reached their ears, and the next moment the figure of a cowboy emerged from the darkness and approached them.

He was recognized by all, shook hands with each in turn, while he explained the situation.

Arkansaw Amos and almost his whole band were gathered around the cabin of Max Huffnagle, with the intention of destroying his family and killing the dreaded detective, who was trapped within. Huffnagle and his men had been decoyed into leaving the place undefended, but the sound of the firing was sure to soon bring them back to the spot.

"There he is now!" added the informant, as he recognized the shout of the infuriated Huffnagle; "he is making things lively!"

The rancher had arrived, while right behind him thundered the five horsemen, and they went into the fight with the rush of a hurricane.

Arkansaw Amos understood what it meant, and realized that the house and its inmates must be abandoned until the new arrivals could be disposed of.

He did not doubt that that could be done in short order, when he would bring things to a conclusion with the detective and the family of the leading Vigilante.

In the words of one of the cowboys—"the band now began to play."

Crack! Crack! sounded the pistols in every direction; knives flashed in the moonlight; curses sounded on the air; men were shot from their horses, and while lying on the ground loaded and fired as fast and as long as life and strength remained.

Si Snork, having his thigh shattered, tumbled to the earth, propped his head on his left elbow, which was also wounded, and coolly discharged his pistol wherever he saw a chance to do execution.

By and by the pain of his wounds became so intense that when he had but a charge left in the chamber of his revolver, he deliberately turned it against his own forehead and ended his miserable existence forever.

The five officers had arrived in the very nick of time, and they improved the minutes. Every one was a hero, and, without an instant's hesitation, they ran into the thickest of the fight and did splendid execution.

The battle was no more than fairly underway, when the seven who were coming across the fields on the double-quick arrived.

The forces against the outlaws now outnumbered them considerably, but the gang fought gallantly, well knowing they had ropes around their necks.

There was no movement toward flight on the part of any, for it was do or die with them.

No one was quicker than Zigzag to read the meaning of the stirring events that opened with such astonishing suddenness.

"I'm wanted!" he exclaimed, feeling the thrill of excitement, as he snatched the heavy bar from its place; "you folks stay here and keep the door fastened."

Drawing it inward, he threw down his rifle, and, with a Smith & Wesson in each hand, he made a bound outward with a yell.

"Whoop her up, boys! here comes your Uncle Peleg, all the way from New Hampshire! Where you see a head, hit it!"

There was a flash so near his face that he was almost blinded, and he felt the pistol-ball nip his ear.

At the same moment he heard a hissing excretion, and Arkansaw Amos, seeing the failure of his shot, again raised his weapon.

"You're the gentleman Uncle Peleg is looking for!" called out the detective, making one tremendous bound.

He came down on the outlaw leader like a mountain avalanche and bore him resistlessly to the earth.

Arkansaw was a powerful man but Zigzag was still more powerful, and he was accustomed to this hand-to-hand business.

Before the savage ruffian could bring his strength into play, something clicked and he was securely handcuffed!

Almost at the same moment resistance was overcome elsewhere, and those of the outlaws who were not killed were made prisoners.

Detective Zigzag was so delighted with the rushing success, that he was on the point of indulging in another whoop, when he saw two of the officers who had come with the engine, carrying a form toward the house, with the evident intention of taking it inside for attention.

Glancing at the pale face he was horrified to recognize it as Fred Ripley, known among his associates as Handsome Harry.

"Is he hurt bad?" asked Zigzag, looking down in the white pinched features.

"Yes, I guess he's done for," replied the officer in a hushed, sympathetic voice.

CHAPTER XXXIX.

TAKING ACCOUNT OF STOCK.

THE gray light of an autumn morning was breaking in the east, when the conflict between the train-robbers on the one hand and the Vigilantes and officers of the law on the other came to an end.

The battle was short, sharp and decisive.

The fierceness of the struggle was shown by the fact that three of the outlaws were killed outright and all the rest, with the exception of Arkansaw Amos and Jubilee Juggens were wounded—several dangerously so.

Nor was the victory gained without cost.

One of the bravest of the five officers who came from Dallas, eager to aid in the destruction of the terrible band, was riddled with bullets, a member of the Vigilantes was so badly hurt that he expired just as the fighting ceased, and most of the rest were cut or struck with balls.

The Heart of Oak Detective had several narrow escapes, but the wonderful good fortune which had attended him so many times clung to him still.

It was his lot personally to capture and handcuff the leader of the robbers and he did valiant service in other directions.

During the fighting the wife of Huffnagle was in a fearful state of excitement. Notwithstanding the warning given her by Zigzag, when he rushed out to join in the fray, the woman was so anxious for the safety of her husband and neighbors, that she threw open the door, so that it might be used as a refuge by them whenever they wished.

It did not occur to her that the outlaws, by a dash, might gain possession of the building and use it as a fort, but the attempt was not made.

Like a Texan wife, Mrs. Huffnagle stationed herself in the door and coolly fired her Winchester, whenever she saw a chance of doing execution.

But, as we have said, the battle was ended, and then an "account of stock" was taken.

The engineer and fireman who brought the officers to Rialto were instructed to place themselves under their orders.

Consequently, all through the stirring minutes taken up by the savage struggle, the engine stood but a few hundred feet away, blowing off steam, and ready to start forward or backward as might be needed.

Having thrown the locomotive "out of gear," the two men stepped from it, and clambering up the bank, kept themselves half-concealed among the undergrowth, while they watched the thrilling sight before them.

The engineer had been a cowboy himself in his earlier days, and was so moved by the scene, that it took all the persuasion of his fireman to prevent him from bounding into the fight, and that too when he had no weapons other than those with which nature furnished him. Such is the force of early training.

But it was now over.

A brief consultation on the part of Zigzag and the leading officer resulted in the decision to place all the dead and wounded in the freight car, and to take them to the nearest town in the county where medical attendance could be secured.

Fortunately this was only a few miles to the north, so that it was not necessary to back the train.

It was an impressive sight, as the dead and dying outlaws and officers were tenderly lifted into the car, and then, when all was ready, the start was made.

To complete the history of the affair:

The result of the inquest and subsequent trial, placed Arkansaw Amos, Jubilee Juggens, and such others as recovered from their wounds, in the penitentiary, for a long term of years.

Now that the scoundrels who had defied the law so long were run to ground, those who had befriended them were the loudest in their denunciation, and in the praise of the heroic men who had been the means of ridding the country of the curse.

But no right-minded person could refuse to commend the thorough manner in which

the great detective and his friends had exterminated the gang.

The rewards which, for a rarity, were honestly awarded and divided among all concerned, amounted to a handsome fee—more, indeed, than most of those concerned could earn in months, if not in years.

The Heart of Oak Zigzag, having performed his task in such an effective manner, quietly went north to St. Louis, where he was soon involved in a new case which demanded skill and daring, the class of cases indeed, which, by common assent, were assigned to the indomitable and trustful man.

CHAPTER XL.

CONCLUSION.

WE said that when the engine and freight car moved northward from Rialto it took all of the officers and outlaws, living and dead.

Perhaps we should have stated that there was one exception.

The body of the Vigilante who was killed and the other members who were wounded were carried to their homes, which were not distant.

Under the loving care and tender nursing of their friends the wounded ultimately recovered.

The single member of Arkansaw Amos's band who was not removed, was Frederic Ripley.

Badly hurt and unconscious, he was taken into the house of Max Huffnagle and laid upon the couch that had been prepared for him.

Evelyn Clarendon, pale but self-possessed, kneeled at his bedside and took the almost pulseless hand.

The wife brought brandy, and mixing a goodly quantity with water, gave him several teaspoonfuls.

The solemn words of Detective Zigzag, who had repeated them at the door a moment before, when he hastily bade her good-bye, swept away every vestige of doubt from her mind.

Yes; strange as it seemed, she knew that her lover spoke the truth when he declared that there was a justification of his course in remaining with the company of outlaws.

She had done the noble young man a terrible injustice, and now he might die!

Holding the hand which, in other and happier days had so often clasped her own, she looked lovingly into the handsome countenance, now, oh, so pale and deathly, and murmured his name:

"Fred, don't you know me? It is I, your own Evelyn! Will you forgive me for the wrong I have done you?"

Still the eyes remained half-closed, the breathing almost imperceptible, and the pulse scarcely moving.

An awful fear came over her that he was dying.

Huffnagle and his wife had withdrawn from the room, so as to leave them alone, the children still being asleep, despite the fierce tumult that had reigned but a short time before.

"Fred! Fred! speak to me, or I shall go frantic!" she called, pressing her lips to his and laying her cheek against his own, while the tears streamed down her face.

"Evelyn!"

The eyes slowly opened, and, as she raised her head, they looked affectionately into hers.

"Then you will not die! You shall not die! You will live! Thank God! my dear, my own Fred!"

He feebly reached up one arm, and, closing it about her neck, held her head on his breast, while the two wept in silence, their hearts too full for words.

The tempest of emotion soon subsided, and was succeeded by a sweet, heavenly calm.

She raised her face, smiling through her tears, while she brushed back the chestnut curls from his brow and said:

"Now, Fred, that you are stronger and are going to get well, tell me your secret, please."

And again she kissed the lips that were framed to speak.

"Evelyn," said he, with a smile, though still with evidence of weakness, "I said to you last night that I had but to utter four words to remove your misgivings or rather your false conception of my position."

"Yes—you told me that."

"I now utter them—I am a detective!"

"I never dreamed that," she said, kissing him once more, "until Uncle Peleg said to me a short time before this awful fight, that you had spoken the truth."

"Uncle Peleg said so? How did he know anything about it?"

"He recognized you."

"When?"

"Just before he spoke the words, I suppose, for he told me nothing more."

Fred laughed quietly to himself, and seemed to be enjoying the recollection of something of which he did not care to speak just then.

"Evelyn," he added, "I can understand how to you, my desire to bring these bad men to justice could hardly justify my affiliation with them. To punish them was not my *only* object but I was the means of saving Dick."

"God bless you, my own noble Fred! Can you forgive me for ever doubting your manliness?"

"Forgive you, yes, I forgive, if there is anything to forgive, and I shall reverence, idolize, and love you always—*always!*"

This time, both arms went around the neck of the beauteous, weeping girl, and they sat for several minutes, weeping, silent and blissfully happy.

Which makes it necessary to explain.

Evelyn Clarendon was the accomplished and brilliant daughter of one of the wealthiest families in St. Louis. It was a family that was descended from the early French settlers of that post more than a hundred years before. They had two children, Evelyn and a son Dick, who was two years her senior.

The latter, like his sister, possessed a brilliant mind, and was sent at an early age to one of the leading colleges in the East. His progress in his studies was extraordinary, and attracted the attention and praise of his superiors, but alas! genius is always peculiarly tempted, and Dick Clarendon did not escape. He fell into evil ways, and not only became addicted to drink but to crime. He made such draughts on his father's resources that the old gentleman lost patience at last, and refused to advance him another cent.

His mother being dead, Evelyn, his loving sister, while she chided, gave him all her allowance.

But, it need not be said that it was misplaced kindness.

Dick, who remained in the East, went from bad to worse, until growing desperate by the network of trouble surrounding him, he broke away and disappeared.

For six months nothing was heard of him, and the belief of his father and sister was that he had made away with himself.

It was a dreadful blow, but they bore it bravely.

During this period, Fred Ripley and Evelyn Clarendon became the devoted lovers of each other.

He was simply a bookkeeper in one of the principal banks, who hardly dared to aspire to her love, but, nevertheless, he won it, and heard the sweet confession from her own lips.

The father remained in ignorance of the infatuation of his daughter, who never dared to tell him the truth, until the time came when she felt that she *must* do so. It was as she feared.

In accordance with the same old story, he stormed, raved, and finally declared that if she persisted in her attachment he would disown her.

In his tempest of fury he openly said that he would have preferred that she should suffer the disgraceful fate of Dick, her brother, rather than wed herself to Fred Ripley, against whom he could say nothing except that he was only a bookkeeper in the bank.

Thus the matter stood for months.

Fred and Evelyn met secretly and corresponded in cipher. They pledged their love and vowed over and over again that nothing but death should come between them.

One day Evelyn received a note, as affectionate and loving as ever, but conveying the startling announcement that he was obliged to leave the city at once.

He was likely to be away several weeks, and probably months.

He not only could not meet her to say

good-by, but for reasons which he dare not then explain, he could not even write to her while away.

This certainly was remarkable tidings, and deep as was the love of the girl for him, she was piqued, and it will be admitted that she was fully justified in feeling so.

She was entitled, at least, to an explanation from him. It was a duty he owed to tell her freely why he went away, and what his errand was, and there could be no reason why he should not correspond with, or at least send her a few words now and then.

Evelyn was proud, and she was offended.

We repeat that she had reason for being hurt, and the high-spirited girl closed her pretty lips and resolved that she would never humble herself by making the slightest advance toward him.

Nor did she believe that he would ever be able to explain his letter, which was susceptible of only one interpretation—an unwillingness fully to trust her.

But during Fred's service in the bank he developed, on several occasions, a wonderful capacity in the detective line. The bank was made the victim of a daring and skillful forgery, which baffled the efforts of the most experienced detectives. Without saying a word to any one, Fred went quietly to work in his own way, detected the forger, and recovered every cent of the stolen money.

He did the work with such brilliancy that he not only received a liberal reward, but won the unbounded praise of the officers of the bank.

The most celebrated firm of detectives in that city offered him a large salary to enter their employ, but he declined, with thanks; he was not ready, as yet, to make the change. Within the following month the bank was entered by three cracksmen, who had rented an adjoining building and reached the vault by a subterranean passage. They blew open the safe, and got away with more than two hundred thousand dollars!

The detectives said the job was one of the neatest done for years. They stated the self-evident truth that the cracksmen were among the most skillful in the country.

That such was the fact was proven by the inability of the detectives, who were baffled in every attempt to capture them and their booty.

A slip of paper and a chisel, on which were scratched two initial letters, so faintly that no one else discovered them besides Fred, were the only clews at command. Yet they led him across the continent to San Francisco, where he ran down the three burglars, secured a large part of the booty, and landed them in the State Prison.

Fred now accepted the offer to go to Texas and attempt to bring to justice the powerful and much dreaded band of Arkansaw Amos.

In doing this, he knew the fearful risks he ran. Other detectives had attempted the task before him, and had paid the penalty with their lives.

One of the conditions imposed upon the young man was, that under no circumstances was he to let a soul into the secret until the task was finished. He was ordered to deny his identity, and insist upon it, from the moment he left the office of the firm until the work should be completed.

He was informed that the Heart of Oak Detective—Zigzag—was believed to be meditating the same task, but Fred was particularly impressed with the fact that, if he met him, he should under no circumstances allow himself to be known to him.

Zigzag was the emissary of a rival firm, and the employers of Fred positively forbid any "combine" between them, if they met.

Fred Ripley took the simple course of going to Texas, assuming the character of a cowboy (for which he prepared by some quiet training beforehand), and joining the Arkansas gang.

His ingenious manner of ingratiating himself into the good favor of the burly Amos was perfectly successful, but the particulars need not be given in this place.

While skirmishing on the outskirts of his enterprise, as may be said, he encountered Dick Clarendon, who had just joined the gang.

Carefully concealing his own purpose, Fred persuaded him to withdraw from his fatal course, and to return to his home,

where his father and sister received him with open arms.

In accordance with his promise, Dick refrained from making known the part his young friend had in his reformation.

Fred Ripley and Zigzag had met once on Chestnut street in St. Louis. They scrutinized each other sharply. The guarded mutual inquiries, while it did not give them the full information, convinced each that the other was engaged on the Secret Service force.

Fred learned further that his rival was a ventriloquist, and that was true; Zigzag was a ventriloquist—not in the ordinary acceptance of the word, but one who had the power of imitating almost every possible sound and of deceiving any one as to the point whence it came; but he very rarely made use of this art at such times, for that very artifice would have been almost certain of suspicion and detection. He would, when necessary, imitate such common or natural sounds as the occasion called for, and was thus enabled to extricate himself from more than one perilous situation.

Fred had failed to recognize Zigzag through his disguise of Uncle Peleg until the latter was caught in such a desperate corner by Arkansaw Amos. With some suspicion, however, of his errand, he purposely gave him valuable information while talking with Arkansaw Amos on the porch of the cabin.

The sound of a person moving on the outside of the window left no doubt in the mind of Fred that the honest-looking New Englander was no other than the Heart of Oak Detective, so sought to impart the important information, which only he would understand.

It was not until some hours later, as will be recalled, that Zigzag identified the handsome young outlaw known as Handsome Harry.

Well, we have said about enough.

Fred Ripley recovered, and when the father of Dick Clarendon came to learn to whom he was indebted for the reformation of his only son, his gratitude was such that he could refuse nothing at his hands.

Fred received, as was his right, a large part of the reward offered for the dispersion of Arkansaw Amos and his men.

Of Fred and Evelyn it need only be said, "And so they were married."

THE END.

Three Brilliant Detective Stories.

BY FRED. F. FOSTER,
"EX-DETECTIVE."

A LUCIFER'S WORK.

ARTHUR WELLINGTON, entering the service of Vine & Drew at fifteen, as a cash-boy, by his industry and evident ability rapidly secured the confidence and esteem of his employers and, when twenty-three, was made a member of the concern, whose name was then changed to Vine, Drew & Co.

Though by far younger than either of the other two, he was really the most active and enterprising member of the firm, giving it a reputation for solidity such as it never had enjoyed until he had a personal interest in its affairs; and his partners, having implicit confidence in his ability and integrity, willingly intrusted the management of the business to him, which he conducted in a manner entirely satisfactory to them and to all who had dealings with them.

One morning he failed to make his appearance at the office at the usual hour—a thing that had not occurred previously since his connection with the concern, save when he was absent from the city on business or enjoying his brief annual vacation;—and, knowing that he was in the city, his partners were naturally surprised—indeed, alarmed—by the singular circumstances, for which they could in no wise account.

"I fear he may be ill," said Mr. Vine, "and will go and learn definitely with regard to it; though it seems as if he would send us word in such a case, especially as we have to decide this morning with reference to the purchase of the L. & B. stock, a most im-

portant transaction, and which must be based upon his judgment almost entirely."

Going to Wellington's boarding-place, Mr. Vine made inquiries concerning him of the landlady.

"I called him to breakfast," she replied, "and as he did not come to the table, I called him a second time—which I have never had to do before in the six years he has been with me. I am afraid he is unwell, but hesitated to force an entrance to his room, and the door is locked."

"Are you sure that he has not gone out without your knowledge?"

"I hardly think he could do it. Besides, when he goes out, he always leaves the room occupied by him open, that the servant may have an easy access to it."

"Please conduct me to his room," returned Mr. Vine.

It was done; and, as repeated and heavy knocks upon the door failed to elicit any response from within the room, Mr. Vine placed his shoulder against the door and gave it a push that broke the lock.

Entering the apartment, he saw Wellington lying on the floor—cold in death, as he found when he went to him. Beside him was a slip of paper on which Mr. Vine, picking it up, found written:

"I am an embezzler of the funds of Vine, Drew and Company to the amount of nearly forty thousand dollars, lost in wild enterprises, which I am confident that I can never return. This fact will explain all."

It was in the handwriting of Wellington, though it had no signature; and left no doubt in the mind of its reader that a suicide had been committed.

Mr. Vine gave such information to the proper officials as was necessary to a post-mortem examination, and then returned to his office with the sad intelligence of Wellington's death—doubly sad by reason of its cause.

"I won't believe that he was guilty of embezzlement, his own words to the contrary, notwithstanding," exclaimed Mr. Drew, his voice so tremulous that his words were hardly audible, while tears stood in his eyes.

"I cannot understand why he should charge himself with a crime of which he was innocent," replied Mr. Vine, whose feelings were less sensitive than his partner's. "An examination of the books that were wholly in his charge, will reveal the truth of the matter."

"Last evening," said the confidential clerk of the firm, Charles French—a young man of about Wellington's age, "Mr. Wellington wished me to call upon him at his room and I did so. He had no especial matter to discuss—as I had supposed he would have—and his talk was rambling. He was painfully nervous, and hoping to partially quiet his unaccountable mental disturbance, I proposed a game of checkers with him—a game of which he was very fond. He procured a board; but, after we had each made a few moves, he remarked:

"I don't feel like playing, this evening."

"Then he spoke of various stocks and said:

"Speculation is the road to destruction."

"I left him a little before ten, and his last words to me were:

"Always stick to a legitimate business. Good-bye!"

"It all seemed very strange to me—his manner, his general conversation, his parting words; but now they are comprehensible."

"You think he was a defaulter?" inquired Mr. Drew.

"With Mr. Vine, I cannot understand why he should confess to such a crime unless he be guilty. And, as he also said:

"An examination of the books will reveal the truth of the matter."

The books were placed in the hands of an expert, who, after long and patient examination, found a shortage in the accounts of Vine, Drew & Co., amounting to above thirty-five thousand dollars. And an autopsy disclosed a large quantity of prussic acid in Wellington's stomach—"enough to kill twenty men."

There was no doubt that Wellington had been an embezzler and had taken his own life to escape the consequent disgrace. The affair was heralded by the papers throughout

the country, made the subject of innumerable editorials of an admonitory character and filed away in the mind of man with other similar events—soon to be forgotten.

By the recreancy of its junior member the solvency of the firm, which at once resumed its original name—"Vine & Drew"—was in no wise affected; and frequently Mr. Drew observed:

"To think that Wellington committed suicide for so small a sum! I loved him as I should love a son, had Providence given me one, and would by far rather have made up the deficiency out of my own pocket."

Charles French sat in his room, his feet on a table, a cigar between his lips, idly staring at vacancy. His reveries—whatever they might be—were disturbed by the entrance, unannounced, of a man somewhat past the middle age, who said:

"Permit me to introduce myself—John Blank. I am glad to find you alone, as I have business of the utmost importance with you, which I prefer to transact without an audience."

"Please be seated," returned French, rising and extending a chair to his unexpected visitor.

"Thank you," replied Mr. Blank, as he sat down. "I understand that you deal largely in stocks—"

"I—deal—largely, in stocks?" repeated French.

"Not in your own name," observed Mr. Blank, with a smile. "In such operations, it is often desirable to conceal one's identity. I also understand that you have lost large sums in your ventures," he continued.

French grew pale and for a moment was unable to speak. Then, his voice quivering, he asked:

"To what end is all this talk?"

"And that, hoping to retrieve your losses, you have resorted to unworthy means, even to crime."

French reeled in his chair like a drunken man, reached out with both hands, clutching at an invisible something.

"Mr. Drew," Mr. Blank went on, "has never believed that Arthur Wellington was an embezzler or a self-murderer, though there was every reason to believe him both. Saying nothing about it to any one else, he employed me—a detective—to investigate the case. I will briefly state to you the result of my investigations.

"The note found beside Wellington's dead body would, save on a very careful examination, appear to have been in his chirography. Subjected to crucial tests, it shows various peculiarities never met with in his writing that are inseparable from your own, particularly noticeable in the formation of the 'e's. You are an expert penman, can so successfully imitate any one's handwriting as to deceive him whose writing you counterfeit.

"If Wellington committed suicide, what became of the vessel in which he kept the fatal poison? None such could be found in his room; and the poison used is so instantaneous in its action as to afford one no chance to dispose of the vessel containing it, after having swallowed any of it.

"No certificates of stock have been discoverable among his papers, nor can anything be found to indicate him a dealer in such commodities. No broker in this city has ever sold him a 'privilege,' whether a 'put' or a 'call.'

"By various devices, I have learned that you, as 'Walter Evans'—(hearing the name French shook like a leaf)—"have lost immense sums in speculation, that you have contrived to pay your 'margins.' How? Having no resources except your salary, you could only do it by underhanded means.

"You have had absolute control of the books of the firm for whom you have worked, though ostensibly subordinate to Mr. Wellington who reposed the utmost confidence in you; you have also had free access to their vault. You stole your firm's funds and 'doctored' the books to suit yourself, knowing you could charge all irregularities to Mr. Wellington.

"When your stealings amounted to such a sum that you reasonably feared they would be discovered, you resolved to get rid of Mr. Wellington—and did. How?

"Among your intimate friends is one

Doctor Thomas. Visiting his office—whose doors are always unlocked—in his absence, you helped yourself to a portion of his prussic acid, securing access to the case in which he keeps his poisons by means of a false key—I learned from him that you had a key that fitted the lock on the case; also, that the quantity of his prussic acid had diminished in some inexplicable way.

"In Mr. Wellington's stomach the autopsy revealed portions of peaches undigested, proving that they must have been eaten but a short time prior to his death. You are known to have a remarkable liking for this fruit, to keep it near you constantly in its season. When you called upon Mr. Wellington, the evening of his death—whether or not at his solicitation as you declared I am unable to say—you took with you some peaches, heavily dosed with prussic acid, and gave them to him; knowing that he would not detect its presence by any peculiar smell or taste, in both the poison so closely resembling peaches. That is all."

For a few moments French remained silent, then—

"It is as you surmise," he said in a firm tone. "I murdered Wellington in the manner and for the reason that you have indicated."

Charles French was tried, found guilty of murder in the first degree, sentenced to be hanged after a two years' imprisonment. He died from brain-fever the first month of his imprisonment.

I am "John Blank," who write this sketch.

PRETTY MISS AMES.

WHEN I was a boy, I suppose I was about as idle as a boy well could be. At any rate, I was so reputed in Wilton, where my home was. But I can honestly declare that the old saw, "Satan always finds some work for idle hands to do," never was applied to me.

Of two things I was especially fond—reading of the methods by which malefactors had been discovered and brought to justice, and "fooling round" the telegraph-office.

At sixteen I was thoroughly informed as to the notorious crimes and criminals of the day; a more skillful "operator" than is many a person who "manipulates the key" as a vocation.

One morning, during the summer when I attained the above specified age, Wilton was excited as never before by the announcement that the bank in Canfield—a larger village than our own and eight miles distant from it—had been burglarized the previous night; and it had reason for being excited, as not a few of the inhabitants were depositors in the victimized institution.

That afternoon my father was notified that the following morning at ten o'clock there would be a meeting of the directors—of which body he was a member—at the bank to consider what action should be taken in the matter. I asked permission to accompany him to the meeting and it was granted.

Entering the private office of the bank next morning, among those there assembled I saw a middle-aged man, who, small, thin, and decidedly inferior looking—sat in a chair, apparently indifferent to all around him; thus presenting a marked contrast to the others who were in a terrible nervous condition, and causing me to wonder what he was there for.

"The hour at which this meeting was called having arrived, you will please come to order," said the president of the bank, tapping a table with his fingers.

They who were standing seated themselves and quiet prevailed. Then the president continued:

"This gentleman, is Mr. Burnet, a detective," indicating him whom I have denominated "inferior-looking," and rudely shattering my preconceived idea that a detective must be and look "smarter" than ordinary mortals. "I took the liberty of sending for him, without authority from you, knowing that no time should be lost, and trusting that my course would meet with your approval."

All indicated their hearty "approval" of the president's act and he went on:

"Mr. Burnet arrived in Canfield about half an hour ago, and has made no investigation, as I preferred that he should not until you had come. I think, however, that he had better make an examination of the premises, give us his opinion and advice before we take any further steps in the matter."

This sentiment was unanimously concurred in, and Mr. Burnet went from the office, alone. Returning a few minutes later, he, addressing the president, asked:

"What is the amount of your loss?"

"About seventy-five thousand dollars, all told."

"When did you discover it?"

"On opening the vault, yesterday morning."

"The premises presented no external appearance of having been forcibly entered?"

"They did not."

"Has any suspicious-looking stranger been in this village, that you are aware?"

"There has not."

"It would be an easy matter for one to secure an entrance to the building by means of false keys; but your vault is furnished with a combination-lock and shows no signs of having been tampered with. Whose duty is it to open the vault in the morning and close it when the business of the day is over?"

"Usually Mr. Elwood—our bookkeeper and teller, who had charge also of the building—does it; but he has been seriously ill, for nearly a week, with typhoid fever, and during that time I have attended to all his work."

"You are sure that you locked the vault, night before last?"

"Yes."

"Who knows the 'combination' that you use?"

"Only Mr. Elwood and myself."

"You have absolute confidence in his integrity?"

"I have; would as soon doubt my own as his. He has been subjected to many severe tests, and, ignorant that such was the case, has invariably shown himself loyal to all that is honorable."

"You never allow strangers—by the word I mean those in no wise connected with the bank—behind your wire-screen?"

"Never."

"And, outside it, one cannot even see your vault door. It is a very singular case, more singular and unpromising than any other upon which I have worked."

Naturally, the directors were discouraged, hearing this. They empowered Mr. Burnet to engage such aid as he saw fit, regardless of expense, and, besides, decided to offer a reward of five thousand dollars for information that would lead to the arrest of the guilty parties—there could be no doubt that more than one person had been engaged in the burglary.

I, who had listened attentively to the conversation, turned to the president and asked:

"Will you please explain to me what is meant by a combination-lock?" my voice tremulous as I spoke.

It was evident that all were astonished, hearing me—a boy—make such an inquiry, but it was kindly answered.

"Thank you!" I replied. "How many numbers do you use?"

"Three," returned the president.

"And no one knows them except you and Mr. Elwood?"

"No."

"May I guess what they are?"

By this time the general astonishment was intense. When the president had answered "Yes," I said:

"Twenty-one, thirty-six, forth-eight."

"Good heavens! that is correct," exclaimed the president, drawing a long breath. "How did you learn them?"

Every eye was fastened upon me, and the silence of death prevailed. I was so nervous that I could not for a moment, control my voice sufficient to reply. Then I managed to say

"Last Tuesday evening, as I sat in the telegraph office at Wilton, as a matter of accommodation to the operator, who desired to be absent an hour or more, I heard 'M' called by 'V'."

Right here for the benefit of those not familiar with telegraphy, I will say: Every office is designated by a letter or letters, and when a message is to be sent, the symbol

representing the receiving office is written by the transmitter—who now and then signs his own symbol—several times in succession. The object is to draw the attention of an operator to the fact that a message awaits him, and when he is ready to receive it, he replies “i, i,” and signs his own symbol.

“Along the entire line upon which Wilton is situated, there is no office whose ‘call’ is either ‘M’ or ‘V,’ so in surprise I waited to learn what was to follow. Soon ‘M’ responded ‘i, i,’ and then ‘V’ asked:

“When will be the best time?”

“The answer was:

“Thursday night. Remember—twenty-one, thirty-six, forty-eight.”

“One operator learns to recognize another by his writing with a key as readily as by writing with a pen, and ‘V’s writing was new to me. ‘M’ was that of the operator in this place.”

“I believe the boy has given us a most important clew, perhaps all that will be needed,” said Mr. Burnet, turning upon me with a look of admiration. “Who is your local operator?” he continued to the president.

“A most estimable and attractive young lady. She has only been with us about four weeks, coming here when her predecessor resigned on account of ill-health.”

“She and your bookkeeper are warm friends?” inquired Mr. Burnet, with an ill-concealed smile.

“They are.”

“Please excuse me for a short time,” the detective then said, as he went from the bank, I accompanying him, at his request.

When away from the building, he quietly asked:

“Will the operator in this place allow you to use the key for a minute or two?”

“I think so,” I answered.

“Well, I wish you to go with me to the telegraph office, solicit permission to do so, and if accorded—” Here he gave me certain directions which I promised to follow.

Going to the telegraph office—unoccupied by any one save the operator, indeed an “attractive young lady”—I was readily permitted to use the key. I had called “M” and “V” again and again, when she tremulously said:

“You must be unacquainted with this line, or you would know that no office along it responds to either of your calls.”

“Why, then, did ‘M,’ last Tuesday evening, answer, ‘Thursday night. Remember—twenty-one, thirty-six, forty-eight,’ to an inquiry by ‘V,’ ‘When will be the best time?’” I asked.

White as the driven snow, and reeling to and fro in her chair, she stammeringly began:

“Why did ‘M,’—to be interrupted by Mr. Burnet, who placing his hand upon her arm said:

“I am an officer, and arrest you for complicity in the bank-burglary that occurred in this village, Thursday night. Confess and you shall be dealt with as leniently as possible; refuse to do so, and, found guilty, no mercy shall be shown you.”

Bursting into tears, she, in broken language, confessed that she was the wife of the leader of a gang of burglars, counterfeitors and forgers, whose commands she obeyed from fear that she would be murdered, otherwise; that, by means of forged letters of recommendation, she had obtained a situation as operator in Canfield, when the position was vacant, with a view to “operations” of another character than those of a telegraphist; that she had worked her way to the favor of Mr. Elwood solely and sufficiently to learn the “combination” used on the bank-vault; that, in order to communicate with her telegraphically, Tuesday evening, her husband had “tapped” the wire at a point nearly one hundred miles from Canfield; that “M” and “V” were their private signals and had frequently been used for unworthy purposes; that her husband had come to Canfield and done the “job,” passing himself off as her cousin, while in the place, and thus warding all suspicion from himself.

She gave information that led to the easy arrest of the “gang,” who had previously baffled every effort in this direction, though they had been long sought for. And, with the exception of a few dollars, the bank recovered its entire property.

No one but those connected with the bank, and Mr. Burnet and I, ever knew that “Miss” Ames, the Canfield operator, who soon left the place, had the least thing to do with the affair. Her husband died in prison several years ago, and she has become a thoroughly respectable woman; at present is the manager of an important telegraph-office in the Far West.

Mr. Burnet insisted that the bank would never, probably, have recovered its stolen funds had it not been for me, and I was paid the five thousand dollars offered as a “reward” against my own and my father’s wish, and to the amazement of my “mates” who could not understand how I “figured in the case” and were never informed.

Is it strange that I am a detective?

“PROVERBS V. 22.”

For several months, subsequent to the decease of the venerable clergyman who, for nearly half a century, had ministered to the spiritual wants of the First Parish of Tiverton, it listened, Sunday after Sunday, to “candidates,” no one of whom was entirely satisfactory to its members.

When the Rev. George Beals—young, fine-looking, genial, scholarly, enthusiastic, progressive in his ideas—appeared in the pulpit, he created a unanimously favorable impression, was invited to take charge of the parish on a salary that would have seemed almost fabulous to the previous incumbent, and accepted the “call.”

From that time the parish flourished as never before. The church was filled each Sunday—many noted “Sabbath-breakers” going to hear the new minister, simply because he was an able, eloquent speaker. The prayer-meetings, under his leadership, became very interesting, though some of the more conservative attendants whispered among themselves that “they seemed tinctured with secularism.” The “sociables,” that had become non-existent from a lack of support, were reorganized, and, with him as their moving spirit, were eminently a success.

The faithful performance of his regular pastoral duties did not, in his opinion, end his obligations; nor with it alone did he rest satisfied. In whatever pertained to the moral, literary and social advancement of the place he manifested a lively, tireless interest. Personally and professionally, he was extremely popular with both sexes—especially with the marriageable young ladies, toward whom he comported himself more discreetly than would most bachelor pastors have done.

He had been settled in Tiverton three months when the village suffered from a series of petty larcenies, whose perpetrator or perpetrators could not be discovered. And one night in July the room of the minister himself was feloniously entered and five hundred dollars—paid him the previous day as his first quarter’s salary—taken therefrom. Learning this, his parish—liberally assisted by “outsiders,” who were glad for an opportunity of substantially manifesting their esteem for him—made up the deficit by voluntary contributions.

“I dislike to receive it,” he said, blushing like a girl, when the money was brought him, “as I can but consider myself wholly to blame for my misfortune. I ought to have deposited my money in the bank at once, for safe-keeping, instead of allowing it to remain in the drawer of my writing-desk over night, when I knew that there were those of evil intent in or about this village.”

“It is the wish of your friends that you accept their offering, and you will please do so without any hesitation,” replied the bearer of the “collection.”

Rev. George Beals received the gift without further remark—but not without an apparent reluctance—and with thanks that were hardly audible, owing to the tremulousness of his voice.

The local officers did all in their power to recover the stolen money; but, as had been the case with reference to the previous minor thefts, their endeavors availed nothing. There was not so much as the faintest clew to the means by which access to the clergyman’s sitting-room, where his writing-desk was—on the second floor of the house in which he resided—was obtained.

Several weeks later the Tiverton bank was burglarized to the extent of twelve thousand dollars. The directors immediately held a meeting and decided to employ a detective, deciding also that the public should not be made acquainted with this fact, in order that no one might be put on guard against the operations of the detective—a course that would prove advantageous in every instance where the services of such an officer are required.

I went to Tiverton and put up at the hotel, passing myself off as a “naturalist” who wished to get specimens of the “fine minerals” which I had been informed were abundant in the vicinity; quietly prosecuted my investigations without arousing the least suspicion that I was other than I seemed, as I took long rambles from which I always returned with a small satchel filled with “minerals,” laughingly denominated “common stones” by the hotel clerk—and they were.

The fourth day of my sojourn in Tiverton, I called upon the Reverend Mr. Beals, by whom I was cordially received.

“Though a stranger in the place,” I said, having introduced myself to him, “I could not refrain from expressing to you the pleasure that your very able discourse, yesterday afternoon afforded me.”

“Thank you,” he answered, modestly. “It is gratifying to me to know that my humble efforts are approved by my hearers, particularly by those not connected with my society.”

“I should think you would prefer a wider field for your labors,” I observed, interrogatively.

“Results are what we must consider, in our profession; and I do not believe there is any locality where my labors would secure to me a larger harvest than has been mine here.”

“I do not think there is, from what I have learned of you during the few days that I have been here,” I rejoined, with an intonation which caused him to actually stare at me. “Where were you settled prior to your present pastorate?”

“I never had charge of a parish before; was a sort of ‘itinerant,’ not even fellowshipped by the denomination to which I belong.”

“Pardon my seeming impertinence, but I am really curious to know how you secured your present position.”

“Being in Boston, I learned through a paper devoted to the interests of our denomination that this parish had no pastor. I wrote, asking permission to occupy the pulpit for a single day, and it was granted. I came here at the designated time, preached, was invited to remain, and did so.”

“Are your people informed as to your former itinerary?”

“They are.”

“Since you came here, Tiverton has been rather unfortunate in the way of larceny and burglary?”

“It has indeed.”

“I understand that you were the loser of a considerable sum of money?”

“I should have been, save for the kindness of friends who presented me with a sum of money equal to that which was taken from me.”

“It is singular that an entrance to this room could have been effected without wakening you who were sleeping in an adjoining apartment or disturbing other inmates of the building; as singular as that, last Wednesday night, the contents of the bank-vault could have been removed without leaving any evidences—externally—of having been tampered with, when the vault is provided with a combination-lock, whose combination is supposedly known only by persons of unquestionable integrity and trustworthiness.”

“You must have been greatly interested in the larcenies and burglaries, to have learned so much concerning them; more interested than one would be unless he were a detective, employed upon the case.”

“Which I am.”

“I thought so,” was the smiling reply. “Have your endeavors been successful?”

“Let me tell you what I have found out,” and, after a pause, I continued: “Last Wednesday evening, a building was burned in the outskirts of the village. Though the building was unoccupied and of slight value,

every man in the place—except you, who were not seen there—turned out to extinguish the fire, which, owing to a high wind, threatened the destruction of the entire village.

"I reasoned that, during the progress of the fire, it would be a favorable opportunity for a burglar or burglars to operate in the bank, it being at a distance from the scene of the conflagration, where nearly all the inhabitants of the village—women and children as well as men—had congregated: thus rendering it improbable that burglarious operators or operations would be discovered.

"Friday afternoon, near the ruins caused by the fire, I found this," drawing from my pocket and passing the clergyman the charred fragment of an envelope, on which was, "Rev. George B—," and, seeing it, he paled visibly. "I was informed by the president and cashier of the bank that you—in whom implicit confidence was reposed—had been permitted to see the vault unlocked several times."

"Therefore you conclude that I am the burglar?"

"A year ago," I went on, disregarding his question, "there was a noted character in the Far West who was known as 'Brilliant Jack,' on account of his pleasing manner and scholarly attainments. Every effort to capture him was in vain, notwithstanding the officers were frequently close at his heels. Suddenly he disappeared from his former haunts; whither he went, it was impossible to learn. No photograph of him was obtainable, but a description of his personal appearance was widely circulated and it is that of yourself, only—you are smoothly shaven and wear your hair short, while he had a full beard, a mustache, long hair.

"My natural inferences are, that you are 'Brilliant Jack'; that you came here in the guise of a clergyman—partly to baffle the endeavors of those who you knew were searching for you and would not expect to find you playing the clerical *role*, and partly because you thought that you—as a minister—could do wrong and not arouse any suspicion of your guilt; that you robbed yourself to awaken sympathy in your behalf, and, still further, avert any thought of complicity on your part in the petty larcenies—which you had already committed—or the burglary that you intended to commit; that you fired the building Wednesday night for the sole purpose of drawing attention to it while you were operating in the bank."

"You are correct in every particular," he said in the firmest of tones, though a perceptible quivering of the lips indicated an emotion that he was seeking to conceal.

Then he narrated to me his history; said that he was the son of excellent parents, who had done all in their power for him; that he had graduated from one of our foremost colleges and then gone West, merely for the sake of enjoying himself; that he had fallen into evil ways, from associating with evil persons, and gradually sunk lower and lower until he had committed nearly every crime save murder.

"I must have been born depraved," he remarked; "that I am not utterly lost to virtue is sufficiently proved by the mental tortures that have been mine in consequence of my misdeeds. And no punishment that the law can inflict will cause me such suffering as will the thought that I have forfeited the respect of the good people of Tiverton, for whom I really cared. Thank God! my parents died before I became steeped in sin," and he burst into tears.

The immense reward offered for his capture was no temptation to me to hand him into the clutches of justice. And when he had restored the burglarized property and confessed his wickedness, not one of the bank officials had any desire to prosecute their fallen idol.

He resigned his pastorate—to the sincere regret of the people of Tiverton, who were ignorant of the reason for his so doing—and went—I know not where, as I have never heard from him, directly or indirectly, since that time.

Do you not consider the title prefixed to this sketch appropriate? Consulting the Scriptures, you will find it to read:

"His own iniquities shall take the wicked himself, and he shall be holden with the cords of his sins."

THE END.

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